

The Red Envelope by [midnighteverlark](#)

Series: [The Red Envelope](#) [1]

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Accidental Confession, Aged-Up Character(s), Bisexual Mike Wheeler, Byeler - Freeform, Coming Out, Confessions, Crushes, Gay Panic, Gay Will Byers, Letters, M/M, Will has a crush on River Phoenix it's canon

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Summary:

When Will needs to get his thoughts out of his head, he writes a letter he never intends to send. He addresses it to Mike, and tells him everything.

Feeling lighter than he has in weeks and buoyed by the adrenaline of writing it all out, Will acts on an impulse and ends the letter with, "If you'd be willing to give me a chance, I'd be really happy to date you. If you're open to trying it, please meet me in Castle Byers this Saturday at 2:00pm. I'm not asking for any promises, I'm not asking for forever or anything like that; all I'm asking is that you give me a chance. Come if you want; if not, I completely understand, no hard feelings, and I'll never, ever mention this again."

He forgets all about the letter, and the distinctive red envelope he stowed it in, until he turns around to find it missing. Now, Will has to

think of some way to stop Mike from reading that letter - or should he wait at Castle Byers on Saturday at 2:00pm and pray for a miracle?

1. The Letter

Author's Note:

Am I aware that the concept of this fic is pretty similar to a fic I've already written? Yes. Do I care? Nope! Not even a little bit. I love me some accidental confession coming out stories. Fight me.

Also: they are 16 (maaybe 17) in this, just for reference.

4/12/88

Dear Mike,

Dear Michael,

Mike,

This feels silly but I want to write it down, get it out of my head somehow. It's not like you'll ever actually read it, anyway, so I guess it doesn't matter if it sounds silly or not.

My therapist suggested I write a letter to someone I wanted to talk to, whether I send it or not.

I don't think I'll send this.

I won't send this.

I can't I just wanted to tell you

No, that doesn't feel right.

Will slaps his pen down on the desk, gathers the piece of paper in a palm and crumples it. The next sheet stares up at him accusingly, blank and fresh and clean. The blue lines have blurred somewhat near the middle, and his hand moves on its own while he thinks,

picking up the pen again to sketch in the margins. He fills out the rough outlines of a dragon, dawdling to add scales and sharpen the planes of the face, before carding a hand through his hair and moving to the top of the page again.

He starts over, this time with no mention of the letter's lonely, unread fate. Of course he never intends to actually let anyone read it. Not Mike, not anyone else. Ever. But he wants this to be genuine. No disclaimers, no excuses.

It takes him another five minutes just to decide how to start.

4/12/88

April 12th, 1988

7:55pm

Mike,

I like you.

He has to stand up and walk in circles around the room for a few moments to shake out the nerves in his chest. He's stupidly, inexplicably nervous. Which is ridiculous. They're just words on a piece of paper. No one will ever see them but him. But still, adrenaline pumps through him in little tremors as he picks up the pen again.

Okay, there, I said it. My heart is pounding right now. It's just a dumb letter, but I'm still nervous.

I just I guess I just wanted to tell you. Just once. I like you. I mean, more than just the regular friends kind of As in, I have a crush on you. I have

since we were twelve, or maybe earlier, I'm not sure. Since before the demogorgon took

Never mind, I don't want to talk about that. Sorry, I'm bad at this.

He's stuck again. Why is this so goddamn difficult? Every word is stop-and-go, every other sentence scratched out before it's finished.

Just tell them everything you want to say to them, his therapist's voice pipes up from his memory. It's a new therapist; a plain-faced but kind and genuine young woman with her credentials displayed above her desk in glossy frames. Will likes her much more than the taciturn man he had been going to before; at least she doesn't stare at him unblinkingly after every question. *It doesn't even matter if you give them the letter or not. What's important is that you get your thoughts out of your head and on paper, and I've found that having someone to address your thoughts to really helps to get them going.*

Will sighs, and positions the pen again. Mike. This is for Mike. What would he say, if he was really talking to his best friend? Never mind the fact that he never *could* really say these things to Mike.

I guess that's kind of it. I mean, no, there's more. There's a lot more, and I want to tell you, I really do. I want to get it out of my head, just this once. I just don't know how to say it. I've never been good at putting things in words. Not like you are. You've always been good at that. It's something I've always liked about you.

I guess I could start there.

Things I like about you:

-How good you are at always saying the right thing and explaining things

-How you bring campaigns to life with the voices and characters and descriptions you do

-You're patient

-How expressive You're so vibrant full of life. You've never been afraid to laugh out loud, or show it when you're happy or sad or angry, or take up space and make yourself heard. I've always kind of admired that.

-You're persistent stubborn (let's call it what it is)

-Your freckles. They're faint but they're everywhere. They're the color of caramel.

-Your dark, wavy hair. It's like it wants to be curly but can't make up it's mind so it just kind of settles with fluffy. You can never get it to lie flat, and you say you hate it, but I like it.

-The way you care about people so much. Even people you don't really know.

-You can be a little bossy sometimes, and a little black-and-white about things, but you always apologize and try to make things right if you do something wrong. I've noticed that.

-Your dark eyes that tend to show everything you're thinking

-I like your face

- Your lips are

-You're brave. But sometimes I think that maybe it's not because you're not afraid, but because you don't think you're worth as much as other people. Like how Dustin always tells the story of how you jumped off a cliff to save him from getting cut up by Troy (your life is more important than Dustin's baby teeth Michael!!)

Ugh. I'm talking about that fall again.

I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't talk about it - I shouldn't even think about it. It's over. I should just let it go. It seems like everyone else has. Why am I the only one who But I can't ever really get it out of my head. It seems like I'll have a good day, nothing bad has happened, nothing is out of the

ordinary, but... it's still there. It's worse some days than others. But it's always there.

That's something I've been meaning to tell you, too. About what happened when we were kids. About what it was like. I don't usually talk about it. I try not to. But I think you'd understand, and plus, you're one of the only people who doesn't get that look in their eyes like they pity me, or they're worried about me, when

No. Will puts the brakes on that train of thought with a long, emphatic scratch through the letters. He lets out a breath. It's getting a little easier. The adrenaline has mostly run dry, by now, and his back hunches over the paper as he gets on a roll. Now that he's started, the words crowd up against the tip of his pen, piling up in his head like snowflakes faster than he can write them. His handwriting turns sloppy.

Today was a bad day. I think that's part of why I wanted to write this. I wanted to hug you at lunch today. I could tell you knew something was wrong, but I didn't want to explain it. "Oh, me? I'm just moping because an overhead light in third period kept flickering and it put me on edge, and I hate that I'm still so jumpy. And now I'm mad at everything and everyone for no particular reason, especially you because you're just so observant and earnest and I want to just smack your handsome face, or maybe kiss it, not sure right now. See you in gym! Hug before we go?" Yeah. No. Plus, it's not like I could just go and hug you in the middle of the cafeteria without people looking. And talking. And I'm sure you don't want my reputation rubbing off on you.

I'm sorry, that was kind of mean. I'm just in a weird mood. Like I said. Bad day.

I don't know. I just want

I just want to kiss you when I'm happy and hold your hand when I'm scared and be held by you when I'm sad. Why is that such a bad thing? Why does everyone say that people like me are wrong and disgusting and

*unnatural for wanting that? What's so unnatural about holding hands?
Why is the world like this, why*

It's just not fair how

I'm just saying I'd

*It's not fair because I'd be a good boyfriend, if I could be. At least, I'd try.
I think that's what I'm trying to say. If I had a boyfriend I'd*

*Why is this so difficult to write? It's not like I'm really saying it out loud.
It's not like anyone else is here.*

Okay. Here we go again. I'm not going to chicken out this time.

If I had a boyfriend, I'd always look after him. That sounds stupid, but I don't mean it like Not like he couldn't take care of himself, but like giving him my jacket if he was cold and making sure he had enough to eat and standing up for him at school. I know I'm small and I can't fight for shit, but I'd try. I know perfectly well I'd get my ass kicked, but it would be worth it. I've always kind of wanted to do that, actually. It doesn't quite seem worth it to stand up for myself - what's the point, really? - but just once, if he picked on my (non-existent) boyfriend, I'd love to march right up to Troy and shove him head-first into the lockers. And then I'd help up my boyfriend and maybe kiss him, right there. And in a perfect world, we'd be happy, despite everything. But I know better than to hope for any of that. In Hawkins? Yeah, right.

Plus, who am I kidding? I'd probably be too much of a coward. Like I always am. It seems like running is all I know how to do. I hate it.

I'm scared all the time, Mike. You say I'm brave, that I'm a survivor, but I'm not. I have to sleep with the goddamn lights on and I hate it. I hate that I jump when a car backfires. I want to be brave, but I'm a coward. But I feel safe with you. Or maybe with you it's just easier to be brave, I don't know.

I wish you were like me. I know that's selfish. And I know you're not like that. I've seen how you admire Emmy Stevens' hair when she's not looking, and I've heard you talk about your crushes, and I know you really loved El - why did you break up with her, anyway? I know it wasn't

just because it “wasn’t working out,” I know you better than that. It’s been almost a year, and you don’t seem as sad about it anymore, but I wish you’d talk to me.

Is it because you’re

But anyway. I wish you were like me. Even if you didn’t like me back, that’d be fine, I just wish I could talk to someone about all this. Really talk to someone. I wish someone understood me. I wish I could talk to you about crushes the way you talk to Lucas and Dustin. I’ve been tempted before. To tell you everything. It’s easy to talk to you, even about hard things, like what happened last fall. And you listen. That sounds stupid. Of course you listen. I mean, you listen, but you don’t, I don’t know, treat me like I’m breakable. You don’t walk on eggshells around me. But you still listen to what I have to say like you really want to know what I’m thinking, and... I don’t know, I’m making no sense.

It’s just easy to talk to you. Sometimes I think about telling you everything. I think about just blurting it out, just, “Mike, I’m queer.” But I’m always too scared you’d be angry, or grossed out by me, or... so many things. I don’t think I’d be able to take it if you backed away from me like I disgusted you and

But sometimes

I’ve been thinking about it and I’ve noticed that

Can I ask you something?

There’s something pushing at the back of Will’s brain. A quiet, thoughtful voice, worn smooth and round from going over it so many times. It settles in the corner of his mind like a shiny pebble - a tiny, slippery-smooth weight on his train of thought that whispers, *Maybe. Maybe.*

It would be best to ignore it. That’s what he’s always done before. It’s a stupid thought - an empty, false hope - but he can’t shake it. And now that he’s saying everything anyway, he may as well.

Look, I'll just say it. Sometimes I get this feeling, like, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe you are like me. Sometimes I see you staring at a handsome actor on the screen while Dustin and Lucas talk about the actresses, or I catch you turning your head as a cute guy passes by. Or like that one time that redhead guy in Chemistry said you were really smart and you blushed for about five minutes. And I've never heard you make a joke about gay people the way the others sometimes do. And you always fight back when Troy calls me names. And sometimes you say things to me that sound like you care about me the way I care about you. I still remember three years ago when you told me that making friends with me was the best thing you'd ever done. That was the first time I thought that maybe I wasn't the only one who Sometimes I think... maybe. Maybe you are.

I'm probably overthinking this. I know I'm overthinking this. You like girls. That much is pretty obvious a lot of the time. But - god, I can't even write this without blushing and squirming around in my chair, I'm so pathetic - I like to daydream, sometimes, that you like me too. Every once in a while it seems like you could, in another universe or timeline or whatever. Just sometimes when I look up and you're already looking at me, or when you lean up against me when we stand next to each other, or laugh at my jokes even when they're not really funny. I know you're just being a good friend. It doesn't actually mean anything. I know that.

But even so, Will finds himself biting back a grin. This doesn't feel weird anymore. Actually, it's kind of nice. It's all the best parts of actually talking to someone - saying the things he's never said to anyone before - without any of the risks of exposing himself. The desk lamp casts him in a golden bubble of light, and on the other side of the wall, his mom bumps around the kitchen. It's a quiet kind of evening, the air unusually warm outside for mid-April. He tucks his feet up underneath him, folding himself into the chair, and he tells Mike about the crushes he's had. The kind of thing the others talk about all the time. The kind of thing he's always wanted to talk about. River Phoenix's hair. The green-eyed, sharp-tongued boy in Mike's drama class whose name Will doesn't even know. Tyler Ewings, who moved away in 5th grade but whose infectious chuckle and impressive vocabulary Will never forgot. And that young substitute art teacher, fresh out of college, with the wildly curly black

hair and butter-smooth voice.

Actors, classmates, acquaintances. Eyes, hands, hair, voices. Will sketches a couple of them at the bottom of the page. Mike, of course, is included. His unruly hair and dark, expressive eyes and his lips. Drawing lifts his spirits, and the whole time that little shiny pebble of thought rolls around and around in the current of his mind, until he goes back to writing.

I'm sorry I'm rambling so much. I've filled up so many pages I lost count. (Sorry, tree that gave your life to make this notebook paper.) I just have so much to say. I wish I had a friend who was queer. There's just so much in my brain that I never get to let out, and now... I guess I went overboard. Sorry. I feel better though. Writing it all out feels good. Thank you for listening. I wish I could actually tell you this.

That insistent thought has made its way to the very forefront of his mind. He pauses before it can get to his pen, but... why not? It's not like there's any harm.

He makes several false starts, fresh nervousness fizzing through his stomach. But he presses on. He wants to imagine, just for a moment, that this is real. That he's actually going to send this letter. That maybe... Well. Maybe.

Hey, Mike, I

I had an idea just now.

I was thinking

Look. I know it's unlikely, but I've been thinking while I've been writing this, and I want to at least ask. Would you like If you'd be willing to give me a chance, I'd be really happy to date you.

I know you're almost definitely straight I'm pretty sure you're straight, and

I know Hawkins isn't exactly a very progressive place to be, but I'm offering. I want to offer, because even though it's very unlikely, there's still a tiny chance, and I think I'd really regret it if I never even tried. So, on the off-chance that you'd ever consider

I just want

I honestly think we could make each other happy. We work really well together, and we trust each other, and we laugh at the same stupid things, and it's always kind of been us against the world. I'm not saying it wouldn't be hard, because I know it would be. I'm not stupid. We'd have to be really careful, and we might have to fight our way out of a few scrapes. But we'd be fighting together. And that's enough for me.

If you're open to trying it, please meet me in Castle Byers this Saturday at 2:00pm. I'm not asking for any promises, I'm not asking for forever or anything like that; all I'm asking is that you give me a chance. Come if you want; if not, I completely understand, no hard feelings, and I'll never, ever mention this again.

Please don't hate me.

Love,

Sincerely,

Love,

Will

He signs off with his heart pounding, gathers and folds the sheets of paper, and stows them away in a bright red envelope leftover from Christmas. Red, because he does *not* want to get this envelope mixed up with the slew of other papers and scraps in his desk drawer.

He takes up the pen one last time, working his wrist in circles to ease a hand cramp, and then addresses the envelope in big, neat letters: *Mike.*

And then, floating on a cloud of adrenaline, relief, and pointless

anticipation, he tosses it on his desk and goes to watch whatever Jonathan is watching on TV.

The next day is a Tuesday; one of those Tuesdays that are worse than the preceding Monday. It's a blur from the very start. Will sleeps late, bikes to school with messy, unbrushed hair, and barely gets a quiet moment through the whole school day. At lunch the Party complains about the workload; they swear up and down that teachers do it on purpose. Every class has a big project or an essay or a test coming up at the same time. There's a lab in Chemistry, a fire drill in American Literature, and a quiz to finish everything off. After school, the club meeting devolves into an impromptu couples counseling session for Lucas and Max, who are squabbling again. And before Will knows it, he's back home, exhausted, scowling at the list of assignments for the week.

Mike's voice cuts through his haze of bleary annoyance.

"Hey, is this for me?"

"Hmm?" Will hums, not looking up from his homework. Mike's figure is in his peripheral vision, beside the desk. Oh, right; he left a mini-pack of M&Ms there. They were destined for his lunch box, but he left in such a tearing rush this morning that he forgot all about them. Of course Mike noticed them, though. He loves M&Ms. "Oh, yeah, go ahead."

Will looks up as the red corner of the package disappears into Mike's backpack.

"Were we supposed to read both chapters by tomorrow, or by Friday?"

"Hell if I know."

Mike plops down on the bed, jostling Will and all his homework, and they spend the next hour doing more complaining than actual work. Not even Mike's somewhat adorable frown of concentration can lift Will's mood. It's just one of those days.

By the time Mike heads home, Will has decided to go back to bed

immediately after dinner. This day is a wash. Maybe tomorrow will be better.

He's passing his desk when his eye catches on the pack of M&Ms beside his pen cup.

"Huh," he says aloud, and picks it up. Chocolate will help. Chocolate helps everything. But he could have sworn he saw Mike take -

Will chokes on a crumb of chocolate. The corner of his desk is empty. The red envelope is gone.

"Shit," Will says. A strange, empty giggle shakes his shoulders.

Then the panic catches up with him, all at once, and he's pounding out the front door and down the driveway, every one of his worst fears slamming through his head like strobe lights. Mike is long gone. Of course he is. He left over ten minutes ago. Stupid. Stupid. He's not thinking straight.

Something crackles in Will's hand and he realizes he's crushing the M&Ms. He tilts a few into his mouth in a clumsy, disjointed motion, and jumps up the porch steps.

He has to catch Mike on the supercomm before he gets home. He has to.

He can't let Mike read that letter.

2. The Tree

The wheels of Mike's bike click softly as he coasts to a stop.

He's only halfway home, and intermittent clouds turn the mild April day chilly every few minutes, but he stops at the edge of the cracked asphalt and swings his backpack off one shoulder.

Loose papers rustle as he shoves around in the cluttered bag. He should probably clean it out. There's stuff in here he hasn't looked at in... years. But honestly, why bother? It'll just get full again, and - hey, *there's* that permission slip he needed a few... years ago...

Ah. Here it is.

His fingertips close around the thick, soft-smooth edge of an envelope. It bulges slightly to contain several layers of paper, and Mike weighs it in his palm as he fishes it out. The paper is deep-bright red, like the sliver of blood that wells in a papercut, and it stands out like a scrap of flame in the blue-ish early evening. Mike pauses before ripping it open. He doesn't have Will's intuition, or Dustin's intellect, or Lucas's logic, but something about this envelope feels significant. He can't quite place it. Maybe it's the bold, neat blocking of his name on the front, or the vibrant shade of the crisp paper. Whatever it is, something makes him hesitate, just like he hesitated in Will's room when he first saw it. He almost passed it by completely until his name caught his eye.

He slots his index finger into the side and tears it open along the crease, his finger leaving red paper teeth in its wake. The contents: lined sheets of paper, stacked and neatly folded.

The hum of a car approaches from behind, and he kicks himself and his bike a few feet into the trees. A truck rattles by in a wave of hot, acrid exhaust, fluttering the papers in his hands. *This is dumb*, he thinks, even as he unfolds them. *I can just read it when I get home. It can't be that urgent*. But somehow, he can't wait. *Something* is in this envelope; something important. Why else would Will leave it where Mike would find it, labeled with his name in large letters? Why wait for him to pick it up instead of just giving it to him? Or better yet,

why not just tell him? They've never had a problem talking to one another before. It's something Mike has taken increasing comfort in as the years pass and talking about what's actually important seems somehow much harder than when they were kids. But it's easy to talk to Will. Will listens. Will never accuses him of overreacting, Will doesn't brush off his outbursts, even when Mike knows perfectly well he's being stupid.

Will, and his thoughtful eyes that never miss a detail; his voice of reason; his inherent *goodness* . Will, who rarely writes things out in words, preferring to take his thoughts and make them into art. But these aren't drawings, Mike can already tell. The inverted shadows of rows upon rows of script show through the backs of the papers.

Curiosity overpowers his puzzlement in one charged, eager wave, and he flips the papers and reads.

4/12/88

April 12th, 1988

7:55pm

Just last night.

There's a sketch of a dragon's head off in the margin, sleek and simple. Mike touches the tip of the snout with a finger.

Mike,

I like you.

Mike's lips quirk to the side in a bemused smile. Of course Will likes him, they're best friends. It would be a little awkward to discover

that Will had disliked him all this time. Why start off a letter like that?

Okay, there, I said it. My heart is pounding right now.

What?

It's just a dumb letter, but I'm still nervous.

That doesn't make sense. Why would -

I just I guess I just wanted to tell you.

Wait.

Just once. I like you.

Wait - no. No, of course he doesn't mean -

I mean, more than just the regular friends kind of As in, I have a crush on you.

That doesn't make sense. That can't be - he can't - he -

I have since we were twelve, or maybe earlier, I'm not sure .

Shit.

Holy shit.

Mike re-folds the papers, stuffs them into the envelope, shoves the whole thing in his backpack, and pushes off towards the town.

A sharp burst of static nearly startles him off his bike, and then Will's voice filters through the metal-and-plastic device. It's muffled from being shoved unceremoniously into his backpack, and he can barely make out the words, but he knows it's Will. He'd know Will's voice anywhere. Plus, it couldn't be anyone else. The supercom is still set to their channel - not the party's, but *theirs*. The one they use on bad nights, when one of them just needs to know someone is listening. They haven't had to do that in a while, but Mike still snaps the dial to Channel 6 in the evenings out of habit.

"Mike," Will says, words garbled and faint under the rush of wind in his ears. "Are you there?"

He bypasses the turn towards his street without answering, and, after a wobbling moment of indecision, pedals instead across a stretch of grass and towards the school. It's a route he can follow on autopilot, legs pumping on the pedals as his mind drifts somewhere in the air above him. He ends up in the schoolyard beside the parking lot. The streetlights came on about halfway through the ride, and the cool tones of evening swirl together with their yellow glow.

The radio again.

"Mike, come in, this is Will."

He debates answering, chewing at a dry piece of skin on his lower lip. He takes off more skin than he meant to, and it leaves a raw, tender patch just off-center on his lip. His tongue probes the spot as Will tries again.

“Are you home yet?”

He twists an arm around, fishes the hard plastic rectangle out by feel, and flicks the power button. He can't talk right now. He can't even think.

There's a stalwart maple just beside the chain-link fence, scattered with decades' worth of initials, sneaker scuffs of unlucky or unskilled climbers, and various flavors of gum. Mike parks his bike against the fence. He hoists himself up onto the lowest branch and begins to climb. The bark is cold under his palms, and slightly damp, as if the tree absorbed the light rain from earlier in the day. It leaves smudges of gray-brown along his hands and shoes.

Lucas has challenged him to climbing contests in this tree before. The last time Mike attempted it, he got stuck about twenty five feet up - well, Lucas says it was fifteen, but it felt like twenty five - and the rest of the party laughed their asses off as he painstakingly picked his way down like a bedraggled kitten. Now, he stops at about ten feet, where converging branches form a convenient Y. The cool-leafy-green smell surrounds him. It's getting cold quickly, but the nearby streetlight is enough to read by, and that's the important thing right now.

He finds the letter again and unfolds it with sweat-damp hands.

4/12/88

April 12th, 1988

7:55pm

Mike,

I like you.

Okay, there, I said it. My heart is pounding right now. It's just a dumb letter, but I'm still nervous.

I just I guess I just wanted to tell you. Just once. I like you. I mean, more than just the regular friends kind of As in, I have a crush on you. I have since we were twelve or maybe earlier, I'm not sure. Since before the demogorgon took

Never mind, I don't want to talk about that. Sorry, I'm bad at this.

So it wasn't a trick of the light, or his imagination. He's traced the letters one-by-one three times over by now. There's no way he could be misreading.

Mike's heart pushes hard at his ribcage with every beat. Up until now, he was swimming in a sort of confused fog of disbelief, but now everything seems real all at once. He swallows. His throat is dry.

He stares at that line for a solid ten seconds, as if... well, he doesn't know what he thinks will happen. But it takes a ridiculous amount of effort to move his eyes along the page, taking in Will's blocky handwriting.

I guess that's kind of it. I mean, no, there's more. There's a lot more, and I want to tell you, I really do. I want to get it out of my head, just this once. I just don't know how to say it. I've never been good at putting things in words. Not like you are. You've always been good at that. It's something I've always liked about you.

I guess I could start there.

His mind keeps telling him he's wrong. That if he just goes back and reads again, he'll realize what Will *really* said. In a bizarre moment of nostalgia, Mike remembers a poster that hung in their kindergarten classroom. It was an ugly shade of yellow, featuring a labeled grid of cartoon faces displaying various emotions. The ballooning letters rise from the nearly-forgotten memory, dancing past him like a nightmarishly cheerful parade, cartoon faces proclaiming their emotions in big capital letters: **CONFUSED! DOUBTFUL! SURPRISED!**

The next section of the letter is a list titled, "Things I like about you."

Doubt swells to block out the other two, and a thought flits through Mike's mind, brief and slight as a songbird across a window. This is a prank. A practical joke. Surely. That's far more likely than anyone actually having a crush on him, right? But - no. Will wouldn't do that. Not to anyone. Will isn't cruel like that, even just to joke around. He never has been.

But that means that... that...

Mike begins to scan down the list.

Oh. *Oh*. Well. Um. Well. Um. What. *What*.

Things I like about you:

-How good you are at always saying the right thing and explaining things

-How you bring campaigns to life with the voices and characters and descriptions you do

-You're patient

- How expressive You're so vibrant full of life. You've never been afraid to laugh out loud, or show it when you're happy or sad or angry, or take up space and make yourself heard. I've always kind of admired that.

-You're persistent stubborn (let's call it what it is)

-Your freckles. They're faint but they're everywhere. They're the color of caramel.

-Your dark, wavy hair. It's like it wants to be curly but can't make up it's mind so it just kind of settles with fluffy. You can never get it to lie flat, and you say you hate it, but I like it.

-The way you care about people so much. Even people you don't really know.

-You can be a little bossy sometimes, and a little black-and-white about things, but you always apologize and try to make things right if you do something wrong. I've noticed that.

-Your dark eyes that tend to show everything you're thinking

-I like your face

- Your lips are

-You're brave. But sometimes I think that maybe it's not because you're not afraid, but because you don't think you're worth as much as other people. Like how Dustin always tells the story of how you jumped off a cliff to save him from getting cut up by Troy (your life is more important than Dustin's baby teeth Michael!!)

His right hand holds the letter, tilting it to most efficiently catch the glow of the streetlight. His left hand has, at some point, glued itself over a wide, toothy, stupid grin. He corrects this as soon as he notices, taking his hand away and schooling his expression. But then he skips up again - *Your lips are* - and his hand lifts, brushing over his mouth.

CONFUSED! SURPRISED! FLATTERED!

His butt is getting numb. The fork of a tree branch isn't exactly a five-star sofa.

He doesn't really care.

Ugh. I'm talking about that fall again.

I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't talk about it - I shouldn't even think about it. It's over. I should just let it go. It seems like everyone else has. Why am I the only one who But I can't ever really get it out of my head. It seems like I'll have a good day, nothing bad has happened, nothing is out of the ordinary, but... it's still there. It's worse some days than others. But it's always there.

That's something I've been meaning to tell you, too. About what happened when we were kids. About what it was like. I don't usually talk about it. I try not to. But I think you'd understand, and plus, you're one of the only people who doesn't get that look in their eyes like they pity me, or they're worried about me, when

Today was a bad day. I think that's part of why I wanted to write this. I wanted to hug you at lunch today. I could tell you knew something was wrong, but I didn't want to explain it. "Oh, me? I'm just moping because an overhead light in third period kept flickering and it put me on edge, and I hate that I'm still so jumpy. And now I'm mad at everything and everyone for no particular reason, especially you because you're just so observant and earnest and I want to just smack your handsome face, or maybe kiss it, not sure right now. See you in gym! Hug before we go?" Yeah. No. Plus, it's not like I could just go and hug you in the middle of the cafeteria without people looking. And talking. And I'm sure you don't want my reputation rubbing off on you.

I'm sorry, that was kind of mean. I'm just in a weird mood. Like I said. Bad day.

I don't know. I just want

I just want to kiss you when I'm happy and hold your hand when I'm scared and be held by you when I'm sad. Why is that such a bad thing? Why does everyone say that people like me are wrong and disgusting and unnatural for wanting that? What's so unnatural about holding hands? Why is the world like this, why

Will is queer.

Mike blinks at the paper a few times, unanswered questions and unsolved mysteries sliding into place in the background of his life. Then he scoffs at himself. He's *stupid*. Why is this just dawning on him now? That should have been his first shock, right from the first lines of the letter, but he's slow to catch on, it seems. His thoughts are all mixed up. He's been caught up in a stream of hot cheeks and butterflies, realizing that Will has a crush on him. On *him*. Nancy always does say he can be self-absorbed sometimes, and he supposes

this is proof. Almost two full pages and he's just now getting around to considering what that *means* .

SURPRISED! CURIOUS! SYMPATHETIC!

He understands.

He understands his best friend's anger at the world, his loneliness, his longing to be with someone - it was that exact mix that led Mike to rush into a relationship with El that neither of them were emotionally prepared for, wasn't it? He snorts, head shaking as he traces a dried pen smear with the pad of his thumb. It's a miracle they came out the other side as friends at all, much less best friends. Turns out what El really needed wasn't a boyfriend, it was the time and space to discover herself. Learn. Grow. Experience the world. Carve out her identity, outside of the deplorable conditions she was raised in. And, if he's being completely honest with himself, Mike could have used some self-exploration too. But thirteen-year-old decision making skills and puppy love is a potent combination, and it took them all of two years to figure out that their love was unshakable, unbreakable, and completely platonic.

And Mike? Mike figured out a thing or two about himself in about the same timespan.

Yes. He understands.

It's just not fair how

I'm just saying I'd

It's not fair because I'd be a good boyfriend, if I could be. At least, I'd try. I think that's what I'm trying to say. If I had a boyfriend I'd

Why is this so difficult to write? It's not like I'm really saying it out loud. It's not like anyone else is here.

Okay. Here we go again. I'm not going to chicken out this time.

If I had a boyfriend, I'd always look after him. That sounds stupid, but I

don't mean it like Not like he couldn't take care of himself, but like giving him my jacket if he was cold and making sure he had enough to eat and standing up for him at school. I know I'm small and I can't fight for shit, but I'd try. I know perfectly well I'd get my ass kicked, but it would be worth it. I've always kind of wanted to do that, actually. It doesn't quite seem worth it to stand up for myself - what's the point, really? - but just once, if he picked on my (non-existent) boyfriend, I'd love to march right up to Troy and shove him head-first into the lockers. And then I'd help up my boyfriend and maybe kiss him, right there. And in a perfect world, we'd be happy, despite everything. But I know better than to hope for any of that. In Hawkins? Yeah, right.

Plus, who am I kidding? I'd probably be too much of a coward. Like I always am. It seems like running is all I know how to do. I hate it.

Mike frowns at the paper, tugging the sleeves of his jackets down as far as he can to cover his cold hands.

It's surreal, seeing this in Will's handwriting. Hearing it in his voice. Will doesn't talk about this stuff. *No one* talks about this stuff.

Why? he wonders. *Why tell me? Why me?*

But the next passage gives him a hint.

I'm scared all the time, Mike. You say I'm brave, that I'm a survivor, but I'm not. I have to sleep with the goddamn lights on and I hate it. I hate that I jump when a car backfires. I want to be brave, but I'm a coward. But I feel safe with you. Or maybe with you it's just easier to be brave, I don't know.

I wish you were like me. I know that's selfish. And I know you're not like that. I've seen how you admire Emmy Stevens' hair when she's not looking, and I've heard you talk about your crushes, and I know you really loved El - why did you break up with her, anyway? I know it wasn't just because it "wasn't working out," I know you better than that. It's been almost a year, and you don't seem as sad about it anymore, but I wish

you'd talk to me.

Is it because you're

But anyway. I wish you were like me. Even if you didn't like me back, that'd be fine, I just wish I could talk to someone about all this. Really talk to someone. I wish someone understood me. I wish I could talk to you about crushes the way you talk to Lucas and Dustin. I've been tempted before. To tell you everything. It's easy to talk to you, even about hard things, like what happened that fall. And you listen. That sounds stupid. Of course you listen. I mean, you listen, but you don't, I don't know, treat me like I'm breakable. You don't walk on eggshells around me. But you still listen to what I have to say like you really want to know what I'm thinking, and... I don't know, I'm making no sense.

His heart is pounding again.

That was close.

That was way too close.

Just for a moment there, just for one line - Is it because you're - did he almost guess?

It's just easy to talk to you. Sometimes I think about telling you everything. I think about just blurting it out, just, "Mike, I'm queer." But I'm always too scared you'd be angry, or grossed out by me, or... so many things. I don't think I'd be able to take it if you backed away from me like I disgusted you and

But sometimes

I've been thinking about it and I've noticed that

Can I ask you something?

Oh, no.

Look, I'll just say it. Sometimes I get this feeling, like, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe you are like me. Sometimes I see you staring at a handsome actor on the screen while Dustin and Lucas talk about the actresses, or I catch you turning your head as a cute guy passes by. Or like that one time that readhead guy in Chemistry said you were really smart and you blushed for about five minutes. And I've never heard you make a joke about gay people the way the others sometimes do. And you always fight back when Troy calls me names. And sometimes you say things to me that sound like you care about me the way I care about you. I still remember three years ago when you told me that making friends with me was the best thing you'd ever done. That was the first time I thought that maybe I wasn't the only one who Sometimes I think... maybe. Maybe you are.

This is bad. This is *bad*.

SURPRISED! SCARED!

Mike tears off a long strip of skin from his lip and tastes copper.

I'm probably overthinking this. I know I'm overthinking this. You like girls. That much is pretty obvious a lot of the time.

Mike breathes out. Okay. That's okay. Will may have his suspicions, but he hasn't touched on the actual truth yet.

But he was close. Way too fucking close. *This* close to guessing his secret - that not only does Mike like girls, but he likes boys *too*. He shifts uncomfortably on his bark seat at the thought alone. Both. God. Who *does* that? Who hops between teams like that? Michael Wheeler, that's who, and he's half-sure that if Will found out, he'd be angry. Being queer is one thing. But the funny thing about playing for both teams? They both tend to see you as a traitor.

But - god, I can't even write this without blushing and squirming around in my chair, I'm so pathetic - I like to daydream, sometimes, that you like me too. Every once in a while it seems like you could, in another universe or timeline or whatever. Just sometimes when I look up and you're already looking at me, or when you lean up against me when we stand next to each other, or laugh at my jokes even when they're not really funny. I know you're just being a good friend. It doesn't actually mean anything. I know that.

And that goddamn grin is back.

Mike tries to keep his expression neutral, his thoughts impassive, as he reads. But it's no use. Adrenaline petering out to a low hum, he gets absorbed into Will's words. He's never heard anything like this before. Not from Will, not from anyone. He's never gotten to talk - well, "talk" - about crushes on guys before. He still can't quite believe that he's included on that list.

There's even a sketch of him near the bottom of the page - a simple profile of his hair, jaw, features. Mike scans the drawing for the ugliness he usually finds in the mirror, wondering how Will managed to make him look like himself without it.

A car rumbles up the road, several yards away, and Mike claps the papers to his chest even though there's no real way they could see him from here, much less the words on a piece of paper. They're blasting music, and even through the windows, he can make out the lyrics of *Kyrie* by Mr. Mister. It gets insta-stuck in his head and he hums as he smooths the papers and starts in on the last page.

I'm sorry I'm rambling so much. I've filled up so many pages I lost count. (Sorry, tree that gave your life to make this notebook paper.) I just have so much to say. I wish I had a friend who was queer. There's just so much in my brain that I never get to let out, and now... I guess I went overboard. Sorry. I feel better though. Writing it all out feels good. Thank

you for listening. I wish I could actually tell you this.

What does that mean? Like, actually tell him in person? Mike huffs and shakes his head. They both would have died of embarrassment long ago if Will had tried that.

But then, about halfway down the page, he starts reading faster, then faster, skimming over the words, and then starts at the top of the page again with fingertips white against the paper.

Hey, Mike, I

I had an idea just now.

I was thinking

Look. I know it's unlikely, but I've been thinking while I've been writing this, and I want to at least ask. Would you like If you'd be willing to give me a chance, I'd be really happy to date you.

I know you're almost definitely straight I'm pretty sure you're straight, and I know Hawkins isn't exactly a very progressive place to be, but I'm offering. I want to offer, because even though it's very unlikely, there's still a tiny chance, and I think I'd really regret it if I never even tried. So, on the off-chance that you'd ever consider

I just want

I honestly think we could make each other happy. We work really well together, and we trust each other, and we laugh at the same stupid things, and it's always kind of been us against the world. I'm not saying it wouldn't be hard, because I know it would be. I'm not stupid. We'd have to be really careful, and we might have to fight our way out of a few scrapes. But we'd be fighting together. And that's enough for me.

If you're open to trying it, please meet me in Castle Byers this Saturday at 2:00pm. I'm not asking for any promises, I'm not asking for forever or anything like that; all I'm asking is that you give me a chance. Come if

you want; if not, I completely understand, no hard feelings, and I'll never, ever mention this again.

Please don't hate me.

Love,

Sincerely,

Love,

Will

It's dark.

It's late.

Mike looks up, realizing these things.

He seems to be realizing a lot of things tonight.

His limbs and fingers are wooden and uncoordinated from the cold, and from sitting in a tree all that time.

He re-folds the papers, puts them back in their envelope, slips it into his backpack between two folders, and nearly rolls an ankle trying to get out of the tree.

Where are those little cartoon faces to tell him how he's feeling now?

"Kyrie eleison, down the road that I must travel," his brain sings away to itself as he climbs stiffly onto his bike. *"Kyrie eleison, through the darkness of the night; Kyrie eleison, where I'm going will you follow; Kyrie eleison, on a highway in the light."*

Kyrie eleison.

Lord, have mercy.

He starts for home.

Notes for the Chapter:

As always, if you have a moment, I would be thrilled to hear what you thought :)

3. Code Red

The drawer rattles stridently, jolts off its tracks, and crashes to the carpet. Old sketches, half-used erasers, an empty scotch tape roll, paper clips, and other odds and ends scatter to the far corners of the room. Will drops to his knees and digs his hands into the mess, shoves them around, lifts the upturned drawer to check underneath. A hint of red makes his heart leap, but it's just the plastic end of his ruler from elementary school. He sifts through the jumble of papers with both hands, hoping that somehow he hid the envelope here and just forgot - maybe, in a moment of absent-minded wisdom, he tossed it in the drawer before Mike came in -

He lifts the radio to his mouth with one hand and continues his rampage with the other. "Mike, come in, this is Will," he tries again.

Nothing.

He lurches to his feet and starts adding the inhabitants of his desktop to the pile. Books, homework, pens and pencils, a couple unfortunate action figures that land painfully on their heads, a rubix cube, notebooks, a comic book - oh, *that's* where that went -

The desk is nearly bare, and he falls to his knees again, pawing frantically in the heap. He knows, somewhere in the back of his mind, that he's being irrational, but he's desperate. It has to be here. It has to be tucked in the pages of the comic book - it has to be hidden away under these folders - it has to be stuck to the back of a textbook, somehow, it can't be - Mike can't be -

He can feel his pulse throbbing in his fingertips and temples. He's breathing hard. His words come out a little uneven as he calls a third time.

"Are you home yet?"

It's not here. It's not *here* .

Shit, he thinks, and turns to his backpack. Maybe it fell in here, it has to be just -

“I need to talk to you.”

He’s not answering.

It’s not here. It’s not here, it’s not here, it’s not -

Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit shit shit *shit shit shitshitshit-*

“Mike, please, this is important.”

He goes still. He waits. Lungs heaving, hands wrapped like a vice around the hard edges of the supercomm. Mike will answer. He *will*. And then Will can tell him to come back, make up some bullshit about needing the envelope back. He’ll say... he can’t even come up with a convincing lie right now. But it doesn’t matter. First Mike just needs to answer. And he will. Mike never ignores him, not when it’s serious.

But there’s still just faint, smooth static. Will feels as though he can feel it in his palms, tingling through his fingertips as his grip cuts off circulation to his digits.

“Mike, come in.”

There’s a desperate edge creeping into his voice. The static flows through his hand. Smooth. Tingling. Empty. And now he’s getting mad.

“I’m not fucking around,” he snaps. He’s on his feet now, pacing the room, pointlessly lifting objects, peering underneath them as if the letter will mysteriously appear in a bizarre hiding place. As if he’ll lift up the lamp and say, *Ah! That’s right. I completely forgot, I left the letter with all of my deepest and most jealously guarded secrets under this lamp for safekeeping! Silly me.* He swipes his left hand through his hair. Fine strands stick to his fingers and float around his head with static. All the pacing on the carpet has left static electricity in his hair and crawling in his clothes. His shirt clings to his skin and he tugs at it impatiently.

“Code Red, I repeat, Code Red, Mike.”

He has to be home by now. He could have *walked* home by now.

Will smashes his thumb over the talk button and nearly snarls, “*Mike, come in.*”

But, somehow, he can tell no one's listening at the other end of Channel 6. He can just... tell. The radio feels oddly light in his hand - cold. Like an empty coffee mug, long-abandoned, or an unoccupied bed. Maybe it's just his imagination. When he was in the Upside Down - he frowns at himself for thinking about it - survival depended on getting someone to hear him. On knowing when someone was there, listening. Maybe he's crazy, but - well he's definitely crazy - but sometimes he feels as though he has an intuition about those things. He can almost *feel* when someone's on the radio channel with him. Or at least, it seems that way. It's probably all in his head.

Freak, Troy's voice sneers in the back of his mind.

Will twists the dial.

Fine, he thinks, *fine. If you won't answer me, maybe someone else will.*

He finds the Party's channel and tries again.

“This is Will calling - *anyone* , come in.”

He's stopped tearing his room apart by now. His desk is spilled out all over the floor. His bookshelf is in disarray. Everything is just a tad crooked from picking it up and hastily replacing it. And it's not here. It's gone. Mike took it. Mike took it and -

Oh, god. He could be reading it right now. Maybe that's why he's not answering. He may just never answer again. Does Mike already hate him? Is he at home, fuming, tearing the letter into little pieces because he thought he could trust Will, he thought Will was his friend, but he's a disgusting f-

The mattress groans as Will sits down, hard. He wants to cry.

No one's going to answer you, that all-too-familiar, matter-of-fact voice whispers. *They all know. They all know now. Mike must have read it already, and he's already told them. Your friends aren't answering because they aren't your friends anymore.*

His heart kicks at his ribs. He swallows past a lump.

He wouldn't , he tells the voice. *Mike wouldn't.*

He starts calling out names, one after the other, hands shaking almost imperceptibly. "Will to Dustin, come in. Will to Lucas, come in... Max, you there? El... this is Will, please. Guys, I'm serious, this is *Code Red*. Code Red. Is anyone there?"

He waits.

They're all at dinner, he tells himself as he turns the dial again, searching for any hint of sound other than the empty static. *That's all*. His mom and Jonathan are both working the evening shift tonight; that means fend-for-yourself-leftovers-night in the Byers house. Eat whenever you're at home and hungry. He's alone in the house right now. A wave of loneliness rolls over him, settling in the pit of his stomach as if he swallowed an ice cube.

But everyone else - they must be eating dinner with their families about now. It's dinner time, after all. That's it. That's all. It's just -

There. Something different. Something in the quality of the static, maybe, a buzz, a warmth. Channel 4. One they never use. He lifts the radio and presses the button.

"This is Will calling literally anyone, come in."

And his call is answered. A click, and the static goes silent in favor of some fumbling. Then -

"Hellooooo? This is literally anyone."

"Erica!" Will clutches the radio in front of him, staring at it with wide eyes as if he can actually see through the line to the big brown eyes of Lucas's little sister. "Thank god. Where's Lucas?"

"Why should I know what that nerd's up to?"

In his mind's eye, Will can just imagine her - sprawled out on Lucas's bed with some of his possessions spread out in front of her, radio included, and a self-satisfied smirk making her eyes sparkle.

“It’s important. Please?”

More fumbling, as if she’s rolling over onto her back, or maybe crossing the room to see what else she can snoop in. “What’s in it for me?”

Will’s gaze sweeps the room as he thinks fast. “Um - I’ll get you this month’s *16* from Melvald’s.”

Mrs. Sinclair never buys Erica the “teen magazines” she begs for, and because it’s a subject of frequent complaint from Erica, it’s a subject of frequent complaint from Lucas too - if only because he wants her to shut up about it. Apparently, being twelve, she considers herself quite the grown-up, and regularly stares longingly at both *Teen* and *16*. This is a fact confirmed by Joyce. So Will knows he’s hit the nail on the head when there’s a pause, and then a reply that’s almost tangibly pleased.

“Cross your heart?”

Will crosses his heart, even though she can’t see him. “Cross my heart. Now, please, can you go get Lucas and tell him it’s urgent?”

“Fiiiine. He’s in the shower. I’ll tell him when he gets out.”

“Make him hurry,” Will says, and collapses the antenna with a swift, sharp gesture.

Within sixty seconds he’s on his bike, pedaling hard against the late evening wind, headed for the Wheeler’s house.

It’s a cold, reckless ride. He left without a coat, and his long sleeves aren’t thick enough to keep out the wind. He sails around corners and down hills fast enough to risk wiping out, but he won’t slow down. He should have done this first, should have gone after Mike as soon as he saw that the letter was missing, but he was stupid. He thought he could catch him on the radio.

A car turns onto the street behind him just as he’s approaching Mike’s neighborhood. The muffled chorus of *Kyrie* reverberates through the windows, turned up to high volume, and it’s all he can hear as the car passes him. If he wasn’t shivering-cold, wheezing for breath, and

facing the very real possibility of losing his best friend, the Party, and all his secrets in one fell swoop, he might find it almost poetic.

“ Kyrie eleison, down the road that I must travel; Kyrie eleison, through the darkness of the night; Kyrie eleison, where I'm going will you follow; Kyrie eleison, on a highway in the light. ”

The car turns away towards the school and Will shoots down the road at a speed that might tempt Hop to give a bike a ticket. He slows only when Mike's house is within sight.

He's still wheezing when Karen opens the door.

“Will!” she flashes her commercial-perfect white teeth. Then she registers his heaving breaths and sweaty clothes and wild eyes. “Is everything all right?”

He puts on his usual polite, neutral mask at the speed of light and smiles. “Yes, sorry. Just been on a long ride. I was looking for Mike, actually, is he home?”

He works hard to keep his aching lungs expanding and contracting smoothly as Mrs. Wheeler looks him over with that particular concerned glance of a knowing mother. His body wants to sit down on the porch steps and pant for a while, and maybe chug some water, but he has to be calm. Or, at least, appear calm. He can't be a shaky, out-of-breath mess. Not for this conversation.

But she shakes her head. “No, I thought he was with you today. Wasn't he?”

Her brows draw together in worry and, by some miracle, Will manages to push through his panic just long enough to come up with something half-believable to say.

“Oh, yeah, he left a little while ago. You know, I think he did mention that he might stop by Dustin's house. I'll check there.”

He's already turning away when she calls after him. “Hold on, won't you come inside and catch your breath? It looks like you could use some water. We're having meatloaf tonight, you'd be welcome to join us. And you could catch Mike once he got home.”

"No -" he says a bit too sharply, and amends it with a soft, "Thank you. I should get home."

To what? the voice in the back of his mind pipes up, quiet and snide. An empty house? Five-day-old leftovers? A silent radio because you probably don't have any friends anymore?

But the thought of being there when Mike returns home is worse than the thought of going back to his own cold, silent house. He imagines sitting in the Wheeler's living room, making awkward conversation with Ted, and having to see the look in Mike's eyes when he walks into the house to find Will there. He doesn't want to see Mike's face fall in recognition, and his feet carry him a step back, away from Will, before the yelling starts. It feels as if someone's stirring his guts around with a fork. He does *not* want to have that conversation in front of Mike's family. Or anywhere near them. Or anywhere near anyone. Or at all. He just wants to run - run home, and hide, and pretend none of this ever happened. He doesn't know what else to do.

"Well, all right. Tell Mike to hurry home if you see him, okay? Or he'll miss dinner."

"I will. Thank you. Have a good evening."

That settles that, he thinks as he pedals back up the road. Because if Mike isn't home, and he's not answering his radio, what is he doing? Reading the letter, that's what. Which means Will is screwed.

He's halfway home again when the radio crackles.

"Will, this is Lucas, come in."

Will comes to a sudden halt at the side of the road and grabs the radio from where it's been clipped to his belt.

"This is Will, over."

"Dude, what's going on? Erica said - *get out of my room, by the way, I see you!* - that you were calling Code Red. Over."

His bike rolled to a stop just off-center of a circle of yellow lamplight, and it loosens the band around his chest a little. So he still has at

least one friend. Mike hasn't told them. Yet. No - no, he wouldn't, not ever. Of course he wouldn't. It was stupid to think that he might. Mike may be angry with him, and he may give him the silent treatment, but he'd never stoop to that level of betrayal. Mike isn't like that. He's too good, too kind, to do something like that. Will breathes in a whole lungful of chilly, early-spring-scented air, relaxing just a degree or two.

There's another set of bicycle tracks in the dry dirt, and another smattering of footprints, facing the opposite way. As if someone else stopped here just a little while ago. Will wonders, vaguely, if it was Mike. The dirt isn't soft enough to hold a clear print of the shoes, but they could have been Mike's worn-down Nikes.

He realizes he's been silent for a few moments and says, "Has, uh, Mike been at your house? Over."

"No." Even tinny and distorted through the old speaker, Lucas's voice is clearly puzzled. "Thought he was with you today. Over."

"But have you seen him since school?" Will sits back on his bike seat, balancing with the tips of his toes. The wind picks up and goosebumps rise under his shirt. "Over."

"No. Why?"

Lucas doesn't bother to use proper radio etiquette this time, as if he can sense that something is really wrong. Will kicks at the ground, debating how much to say. He decides on the truth.

"I fucked up... I fucked up really bad. I think Mike is really mad at me." The urge to cry is back and he swallows it down with a grimace. *Don't be a baby*, he tells himself, even as Lucas's voice grows even more confused.

"What? Why?"

"I... I said some things I shouldn't have, and..." He trails off, fighting a closing throat, and eventually cuts off the thought with, "Over."

"You guys had a fight? What were you even fighting about? When did this happen? Over."

"No, it - it wasn't really an argument. Yet. I guess. Over."

"Then why...?"

Will waits, but Lucas doesn't close his question, so he gives in and says, "It was a letter. I just... I had some things I wanted to get out of my head, and I wrote them down, but I never - I never actually meant to send it to him! I shouldn't have ever written it, but I was just going to put it away, I never meant... But I'm an idiot. I'm a fucking idiot. I left it out and I guess he saw that it had his name on it and just took it and now... He's not answering me. He won't answer his radio." It takes a few seconds before he remembers to mumble, "Over."

There's a moment or two of silence as Lucas processes this, thinks it through the way he does. At last he says, "Well - shit, dude. What the hell did that letter say? Over."

Something - a rabbit, probably, or a bird - rustles a few yards into the woods, and Will's head snaps around. His pulse picks up. It's dark. He's been so wrapped up in his own thoughts that he barely realized. But now...

A tiny fleck of water hits the shell of his ear and he frowns up at the deepening sky. The wind has pushed in some clouds from the east. Another drop hits his wrist.

"Nothing," he says eventually, and turns his eyes back to the woods. "Just... nothing. Over."

"Okay, well, maybe if I called him I could ask what's up. Over."

Will barely waits for the last word to come through before snapping, "No!" Because maybe - just maybe - Mike *hasn't* read it yet. And as long as he's still hanging onto the very last thread of that hope, he doesn't want Lucas reminding Mike that the envelope exists.

The small animal moves around again and Will kicks himself forward on autopilot, gliding slowly out of the pool of light. *Too visible*, a nervous thought whispers. But then, as he starts to wobble off in the direction of home again, *Too dark*. He fumbles with the radio, trying to steer and turn on his bike's headlight at the same time. The clouds

begin to spit moisture with increasing frequency.

It's much, much too familiar, this situation. Being out alone, on his bike, after dark. Riding home. His heart has started to pound yet again, a cold sweat making him shiver. He pumps the pedals at a brisk pace and keeps his eyes focused straight ahead. Some childish instinct is telling him that maybe if he just doesn't look behind him, or to the sides - if he just focuses on the watery beam of light from his bike - the shadows won't see him either.

He never rides alone after dark, and this is precisely why. But he wasn't thinking when he set out.

Lucas is still talking through the radio, saying something about getting the party together for a sleepover, and Will tunes in at the tail end of it.

"... at least distract you or something," he concludes. "How's that sound? Over."

"Yeah," Will says, not entirely sure what he's agreeing to, but eager for some company. "Yeah, sure. Over."

"I can pick everyone up in my mom's car. Meet you at your house in a bit, yeah? Over."

"Yeah." Will turns the corner onto his driveway, breathing hard as he hurdles the last few yards to safety. The only light in the house is in his room; the front windows are dark and blank. A little rush of gratitude calms the shaking of his hands. He could definitely use some company about now. "Over."

Mike jogs up the porch steps and lets himself in, his sneakers smudging the dusty footprints that someone else left on the welcome mat. Little flecks of rain started up at the very tail end of his ride, and the instant warmth and light inside the house is a stark contrast to the chilly evening. The house is full of the rich beef-and-ketchup smell of meatloaf. He kicks off his shoes. Somehow, the normality and routine seem bizarre. Shouldn't everything be different? Shouldn't the world *know*, somehow, that everything just changed?

Shouldn't his house look and feel ambiguously but decidedly different, unreal, alien?

But his father is propped up in front of the TV, his mother is humming to herself in the kitchen, and Holly is running back and forth vying for both parents' attention at once. Everything is as it's always been. Well, except for the empty spot at the table where Nancy sits. The house has been way too quiet since she left for college.

"Michael?"

He pauses at the bottom of the stairs as his mother pops around the corner. Her honey-brown hair is piled up into a bun and her sleeves are pushed up.

"I thought I heard you come in. Dinner's ready."

"Okay. I'll be down in a minute."

"Oh, and Will was looking for you."

He turns sharply, but she's already gone again. "What?" he calls after her.

"Will!" she calls back. "Came to see you. You just missed him. Said he was going to Dustin's."

Mike's thoughts won't slow down or shut up as he runs up the stairs, finds the envelope, and tucks it deep into his copy of *The Two Towers*, which he then replaces on the bookshelf. It's a good enough hiding spot for now. He doesn't even want to think about what would happen if he stuck it under his pillow and his mother just so happened to helpfully change his sheets.

Dinner is a blur. It's probably very good meatloaf, but it could be charred black and Mike wouldn't notice. He's thinking.

It doesn't make sense. It just doesn't. Mike isn't very... well, much of anything, really. He's not handsome or put-together like Lucas. In fact, he accepted long ago that he's kind of ugly. He didn't used to get called Frog Face for nothing, after all. He's not funny or smart

like Dustin. He's not artistic or strong like Will. He's not fierce or cool like Max. He's not resourceful or sweet like El. He's nothing. He's just plain Mike Wheeler, the loud gangly kid from drama club with the weird-shaped face and stories of other worlds scribbled in the margins of his homework and sad songs on his walkman. He's a weirdo. Nerd, nobody, Frog Face, annoying *weirdo*. No one has a crush on him. No one *would* have a crush on him.

Except, apparently someone does. A boy. His best friend. Will.

He mechanically lifts his fork to his mouth, bites down on empty prongs, and remembers (too late) to actually scoop up a bite of mashed potatoes. Holly gives him a weird look and he elbows her half-heartedly. She giggles.

Sure, El dated him, and presumably she liked him, but that was mainly circumstance. Their bond was cemented before either of them even got the chance develop a crush on each other. It was mutual need, trust, friendship. The crushes came after. Mike can't exactly chalk up El's feelings for him to his appearance or personality - no, they just needed each other, and trusted each other, and loved each other from the start, and that was it. He knows their bond was more due to circumstance than to *him*. He knows he's nothing special. Which is fine. He doesn't care. Usually.

That didn't keep the breakup from hurting, though, even though he knows perfectly well that there was a good reason. They thought they were in love, but they weren't, and that was that. The puppy love faded and they were both pining for other people and it took them a little while to figure that out. And the breakup wasn't exactly very bad, in itself. In fact, it was almost a relief. Mike had felt guilty for months - here he was with a beautiful and smart and kind girlfriend, who cared a lot about him, and he was busy staring at someone else. What a jerk. What a complete asshole.

So the breakup, and subsequent night-long conversation, was absolutely not the worst part.

The worst part was feeling like he just wasn't good enough, despite everything. Logically, he knew - knows - that it had nothing to do with that. They just function much better as best friends. Siblings in

everything but blood. Plus, El needed some time on her own to carve out her identity in a world that was relatively new and foreign to her. She needed to make her own name in school, and in the town, outside of just “Mike Wheeler’s quiet girlfriend from Sweden” or “That kid Chief Hopper adopted that may or may not be related to him, it’s unclear.” And more importantly than that, she needed to find herself, within herself, outside of the lab.

She was nothing but understanding when he finally broke down and confessed everything, apologizing over and over, begging her not to hate him for not being enough. For crushing on someone else the whole time they were dating. She’s the only one that knows about him. Him, and what he is, and the crush he’s had on his best friend for who knows how long.

He quashes that thought automatically. He tries not to think about that. Ever. By now it’s more habit than anything else. It took him years to even figure out what was going on, and by then he was in a relationship with El, so he ignored it. Pushed it down. Pretended it didn’t exist, that everything was fine, that he wasn’t a freak that couldn’t choose a team. And he’s done a damn good job of ignoring it, if he does say so himself, except for that one night of confessions in El’s room with the TV on in the background and the door closed. He told her everything. She took his hands in hers, squeezed, and talked at length about the exact shade of Max’s hair. And they forgave each other. And that was the last time Mike has intentionally thought about it for any longer than a second or two.

But now, Will has broken that all wide open again. Now he can’t go on ignoring it like he has been.

His family is standing up, and he scrambles to do the same, clearing the table with clumsy hands.

His mother touches his plate on the way by. “You barely ate,” she observes. “Not hungry?”

“Not really.”

“Well, wrap it up and save it.”

He follows her instructions in a haze, already buried deep in his own head again.

Once securely sequestered in his room, with the door locked and the curtains drawn, Mike takes the letter out of its hiding place and reads it at least five times over. He reads at his desk, and then when he can't sit still anymore he stands and paces, and then ends up sitting on the edge of his bed, fidgeting. The complete shock and confusion is only just starting to chip away, and he has to look away from the crumpled papers every few seconds, face hot, grinning like a complete moron. He fights the urge to flop back on the mattress and hug the papers to his chest like some dumb middle school girl.

It's idiotic.

He's kind of mad.

They've been through other worlds and monsters and they've faced death and demons and forces of great evil, and here he is with his heart throbbing in his chest and a deep blush staining his cheeks, ears, neck, and probably the whole rest of his body. Because of words on a piece of paper.

But he can't help it, and besides, no one else is here to see him. So he punches his pillow a few times to let out some of the energy in his chest and goes back to tracing the imprint of a blue pen on lined paper.

Mike Wheeler is nothing special. Kind of loud, and kind of tall, and kind of plain. He's considered a "spoiled rich kid" in some circles, a nerd in others. And that's about it. It's been a while since he saw much more to himself.

But now, he's holding this letter. His hands brush over the physical evidence that his lifelong best friend, and... and his... He breathes in and allows himself to think it: his lifelong best friend and his *crush* thinks that he's eloquent, vibrant, attractive, brave, caring. Reading that list hit him harder than he'd ever admit aloud. It's the first pure, positive evaluation of himself that he's gotten in a long time, and especially after this semi-hellish week he's been having, it... Well. It just kind of got to him.

As evidenced by how he's now lying on his back on his mattress with the letter pressed flat between his hands and his chest.

Damnit. He told himself he wouldn't do that.

The rain has picked up. It taps and pops against his window, and he stands up to make sure he closed it all the way. Maybe it's the slippery, cool draft that flows over his arms, but reality starts to set in quickly and the giddiness dies down in a heartbeat. He can't do this. He can't -

He flips to the back page for maybe the dozenth time and reads over Will's final offer.

If you'd be willing to give me a chance, I'd be really happy to date you.

...

If you're open to trying it, please meet me in Castle Byers this Saturday at 2:00pm. I'm not asking for any promises, I'm not asking for forever or anything like that; all I'm asking is that you give me a chance.

He can't -

But he wants -

But he can't.

His parents - his parents would kill him.

They wouldn't know, he argues to himself.

But if they found out -

So be careful.

But he *can't*. It doesn't matter. He's gotten along just fine burying it until now, he can go on like that as long as he needs to.

Can you?

Yes. Of course. It's always worked before. And anyway, he doesn't know if he wants to face what breaking through his carefully-constructed walls would mean. Those walls exist for a reason. It's safe in here.

Will is asking you to try. Don't you want to at least try?

Yes, but - but so many things. Dating Will - dating a boy - would mean risk. Not just risk. Danger. Real danger. It would mean high-stakes secrets, and the constant fear of being discovered. Fistfights, maybe - split lips and bloody knuckles. It would mean changes. Big ones. It would mean admitting fully, not just to himself but to Will and to anyone who found out about them, that he's queer. Kind of. Halfway? He doesn't know.

And it might just mean losing his best friend.

Whether it worked out or not, what would that do to their friendship? What if it didn't go well? Then again, what if it *did*? What then? Would he still have his childhood best friend by his side? Would it be the same? What would he do without Will? Honest, talented, capable Will, wise beyond his years and endearingly inquisitive. Mike has never really operated without Will. They've been attached at the hip since they were five. Always *MikeandWill* or *WillandMike* . And, as the Upside Down and the Mind Flayer demonstrated, Mike would be completely lost without him.

So, it's decided. He can't.

He can't. Can't do that. Can't risk it.

But are you sure? the quiet, insistent voice presses, and he firmly tells it to shut up.

It doesn't. It whispers to him well into the early hours of the morning, taunting him with quotes from the letter that's back in its hiding place on his bookshelf.

He doesn't remember what he dreams about, but in the morning, there's a little fire in his chest that won't go out. It burns quietly,

calmly, like a little yellow candle flame, all the way through a groggy breakfast and the drive to school. And it leaps up and turns his whole body warm when a pair of wide hazel eyes meet his across the hallway.

Notes for the Chapter:

As always, if you have a moment I'd absolutely love to hear about your favorite part or what you think might happen next or just whatever you think! :) You guys are the best thanks for reading my overwrought slow-moving stories lol

4. Wednesday

Shit.

That's Will's first thought when a pair of dark-chocolate eyes catch his through the swirling pre-homeroom crowd.

Mike will be angry. Won't he? He must be. He doesn't look angry yet, but then again, they're on opposite sides of a bustling school hallway. Not the ideal setting for a confrontation.

Good. He can avoid it for a while longer.

Will unglues his sneakers from the dirty linoleum and weaves through the flow of bodies. The air is thick and warm with that distinctive *high-school-hallway* smell - an eclectic muddle of perfumes and colognes, deodorant and hairspray, sweat, girls' hand lotion and sweet-fruity lipgloss. The smell of the school itself underlies the smell of its inhabitants. Chalk, paper, graphite, plastic, gym mats, old brick walls slathered with stripes of paint.

He feels like he can sense the air brushing past his cheeks as he elbows through the fray, though he's not moving nearly fast enough for that. Maybe it's just that his cheeks are prickling with heat.

His outburst takes him completely by surprise.

"What the hell, dude?"

Mike's hand halts on the dial of his locker. He looks just as confused as Will is by the harsh greeting. "Huh?"

The restless simmer of anger is coiled behind Will's ribs, rising as he plants his feet and glares. He's not even sure why he's angry until he opens his mouth again. "I was calling Code Red on the radio last night. On our channel."

Mike's face falls. "You were?"

"Yeah," Will snaps, "I was. Code Red. I guess you didn't hear that?"

“No, I -”

“You can’t just ignore a Code Red, Mike. Party rules.”

“Shit.”

Mike rubs a hand down his face. When he opens his eyes again, Will notices the gray-ish bruises curving underneath them. And the pitiful state of his hair. And the fact that he had been mindlessly trying to spin his code into the wrong locker. He looks like he got about as much sleep as Will did.

He read it, a small, panicked voice whispers in the back of Will’s mind. *He must have.*

You don’t know that, he thinks back as Mike lifts his shoulders in a kind of uncomfortable shrug.

“Shit, I - I’m sorry. I didn’t hear that at all. My radio was turned off. I’m sorry, what - is everything okay? What happened?”

Will exhales. The burgeoning concern in Mike’s eyes threatens to rekindle the anger in his chest - he’s had enough of being worried about and babied in his life, thank you very much - but he tamps it down. It’s not worth starting an argument over now. There are bigger things to worry about.

“It’s fine,” he says eventually. Then, with a nod of his head, “Wrong locker, by the way.”

“Maybe I wanted to open this one. Maybe I’m breaking and entering. You don’t know.”

“You planning on entering the locker?”

“Yeah, it’s a great napping spot. No one will ever find me. I can sleep right through third period.”

“Best of luck with that.” Will bounces on his toes to adjust his backpack and watches Mike deftly twirl the combination into the right locker. He’s still mad. But the tension has relaxed by a few degrees. He falls into step at Mike’s side and they start off down the

hallway, guided by muscle memory and peripheral vision as they talk.

“Seriously, though, what happened?”

Will dodges a trombone case and considers his options. This could be his chance to get the letter back. If Mike hasn’t read it yet, he could just ask - but if he *has* read it - obviously he can’t bring it up if he’s already read it - but if he *hasn’t* -

“Nothing.”

Will peels off into his homeroom before Mike can question him, the bell acting as a firm and abrupt end to their conversation.

Half the day passes and there’s no sign of the envelope.

Not that he expected there to be. Still, he’s been keeping an eye out, just in case. Because maybe, just maybe, Mike hasn’t read it yet. Maybe it’s still in his backpack, unopened. Maybe Will can just duck under the table for a second and find it and take it back, and -

No, that’s stupid.

But he’s sleep-deprived enough to give it legitimate consideration more than once.

“I’m *telling* you, it looks awesome!”

“It looks stupid.”

Dustin gives Lucas a scathing look. “Okay, sure. Sword fighting, magic, Joanne Whalley, monsters, hobbits, did I mention Joanne Whalley? But yeah, it looks stupid. I’m sure.”

Lucas rolls his eyes and leans across the table to argue. “They’re not hobbits. And have you even seen the trailer? It’s all about trying to save some baby from an evil queen. It sounds like a weird, off-brand Disney movie. It’s stupid.”

The Party has been doing their best to keep the conversation flowing,

and to act like they're not walking on eggshells. Keeping up the light chatter isn't that difficult with six of them, but today conversation has been a little more muted than normal. Mike and Will aren't really talking to each other, and that throws the whole group dynamic for a loop. Dustin has been making up for it with extra volume.

Everyone stayed at the Byers' house last night, except for Mike. Even El, who spends almost all of her nights in her own room in Hop's house. They stayed up way too late for a school night, whispering and giggling, spread out over Will's bedroom floor. Everyone else nodded off around one in the morning; Will couldn't sleep for another two hours.

Lucas is the only one who knows any details. Will didn't feel like explaining the situation again, and Lucas didn't pry. All the Party knows is that Will had some kind of argument with Mike, and they've been sending him periodic sympathetic grimaces ever since they arrived at his doorstep last night. By now the frequency has petered out to a low trickle, and Will is glad. He was happy to have everyone over. They were invaluable in calming his near-panic and distracting him from the issue, but right now he just wants everyone to act normal again. He wants to pretend that nothing is happening; that his life isn't right on the edge of what could be a monumental change.

"Uh, have *you* even seen the trailer? Because I think you missed like ninety percent of it."

"Totally awesome," Will offers, and Dustin jabs a flat palm at him.

"*Thank* you, Will. At least someone agrees with me. Anyone else? Mike?"

Mike's head pops up, his gaze unfocusing from the tater tots on his tray. He blinks, as if surfacing from a deep thought. "What?"

"Geez, you in there?"

Max leans around Lucas, her vibrant ponytail swinging between them. "He was doing that all through math, too."

Mike makes a face at her. "I was not."

She arches an eyebrow, looks down at her food, and mutters something sassy under her breath.

“ *Willow* ,” Dustin prompts, clearly eager to get the conversation back on track. “Comes out next month. In or out?”

Mike grins. “In. Totally in.”

“See?” Dustin shoves Lucas, who lifts his hands in surrender. “It’s awesome. Told you. Sword fighting, magic, *and* Joanne Whalley.”

Lucas mumbles from behind his milk carton. “Who even is that?”

Dustin makes a gesture like he’s been shot in the chest. “Only the most gorgeous woman on the planet, maybe!”

“His new celebrity crush,” Mike interjects, finally tuning in enough to join the conversation. “Don’t worry, he’ll get over her soon. He gets a new one every other week.”

“I do not. El, do I do that?”

El, who has been reading silently beside Mike, nods firmly without looking up. Will has absolutely no doubt that she’s been simultaneously reading and following the conversation, and probably a handful of other things while she’s at it. She’s kind of scary-cool like that.

Dustin sits back with a humph. “You guys are no help.”

Max steals a handful of Lucas’s fries while he’s busy laughing.

Will’s gaze flicks to Mike, ready to share a grin at Dustin’s dramatics, only to find Mike already looking at him. His sandwich freezes halfway to his mouth, breath catching at the expression that he glimpsed for the briefest of moments, but it’s already gone. Mike turns away. But it was there. Just for a second. Whatever it was.

Mike’s hair is still wild. Even wilder than it was this morning, if possible. As if he’s been running his hands through it. The dark waves stand out from his head and bob infinitesimally as he talks.

He looks awful. Rumpled and frazzled and dead-tired, and not in the cute way. Mike never has been the kind of guy that can easily pull off the just-rolled-out-of-bed, touseled, messy-sexy kind of look. Now, River Phoenix, on the other hand, has messy-sexy down pat. Will sticks the flimsy straw of his juice box between his teeth and looks casually to his best friend once more.

Still cute, he decides, and then shakes his head at himself.

Sometime in ninth grade, Mike shot up in a series of rapid growth spurts, and the baby fat fell away from his face seemingly overnight. His hair seemed to stage its own personal rebellion as it gradually shape-shifted from *mildly wavy* to *fluffy-wavy* to *wavy-curly*. His brows grew in dark and a bit untamable. He never quite grew into his hands or feet, or legs, for that matter, and is constantly tripping all over himself. But other than that, Mike is still the same earnest, outgoing dork that Will has always known. Same freckles everywhere, over his nose, down his arms, even at the backs of his hands, so faint you have to look closely to notice. Same round, dark eyes. Sharp cheeks and a tapering chin. Full lips that blush a delicate pink after he's been eating or chewing on them.

All this Will has taken mental note of, over the years, only so he can practice sketching. Of course. Nothing else.

The lie is stretched so thin that he barely gives it a moment's attention. It's more of a reflex at this point than anything else; something leftover from when he was younger, like the too-small shoes somewhere in the back of his closet or the paperbacks he loved in middle school, now dusty and half-forgotten on a shelf.

Of course he's just memorizing Mike's features so he can draw them. Of course there's nothing else to it. Of course he hasn't been in love with his best friend for years. Of course it's normal. Of course *he's* normal.

Will packs up on autopilot when the bell rings and students pour through the cafeteria doors. He floats along at the back of the group, not really paying attention to the conversation anymore.

Will gave up on *normal* a long time ago. He held onto the last threads

of hope until he was twelve, telling himself that it was okay, he was okay, it would go away. Surprise: it didn't. And then there was the Upside Down. The Demogorgon. And, a year later, the Mind Flayer. And *normal* wasn't really a privilege he got to hope for anymore.

Somewhere in the attendance office, someone is blasting the radio. Probably a bored office aid, or that young secretary with long, long pink nails. Whitney Houston's voice follows them down the hallway, seeming to taunt Will as he strides along beside Mike, just close enough for their elbows to bump.

"There's a boy I know, he's the one I dream of; Looks into my eyes, takes me to the clouds above; Ooh I lose control, can't seem to get enough; When I wake from dreaming, tell me is it really love?"

Will has been stubbornly pretending that nothing is happening.

So, Mike has been stubbornly pretending that nothing is happening, too.

It seems like the only logical course of action. Clearly neither of them can just lean across the lunch table and say, *"So, about that letter. Shall we chat? What do you think about Saturday? Should we go for something life-changing or stick to what's safer?"*

Mike can't have that conversation right now. He's been thinking all day - well, for about the past eighteen hours, if he's being honest - and he still doesn't know what he thinks. He can barely convince his brain to make coherent thoughts right now, much less speak them aloud.

Plus, Will is still mad at him for turning off his radio.

So, for once, Mike keeps quiet.

The Party knows something is up - of course they do, they're not stupid - but no one says a thing until after lunch, when Lucas sidles up to him in fifth period and says, "So, what's going on?"

"World History," Mike deadpans, and tries to ignore him.

“You know what I mean.” Lucas scoots his chair closer and lowers his voice to blend in with the rest of the classroom’s chatter. “Between you and Will.”

A little ripple of shock makes Mike’s fingers twitch. He looks sharply at his friend. “What do you mean?”

Lucas lifts both hands in a placating gesture. “Nothing, man. You two have been acting weird, that’s all.”

Mike looks back at his worksheet, pulse slowing again. Someone across the room calls out an innuendo-smothered joke and the volume in the room spikes as the class laughs. But Lucas stays focused on Mike, not even pretending to work on filling out the worksheet.

“Did you get number six?” Mike says.

Lucas ignores him and instead says, “So, you two had a fight?”

“I think it’s the Mayans. I always get them mixed up with the Incas, though.”

“What was it about?”

“Which one was the North American one?”

“Mike.”

“Are you gonna help?”

“Mike.” Lucas is annoyed now, and it tilts his tone down a degree. He waits until Mike looks at him to continue. “Are you mad at Will? Like, seriously mad? Because that’s what he seems to think.”

Oh.

Something in Mike’s stomach cinches tight. Guilt, maybe, and about twenty other things.

He swallows it as best he can and says, “No, why?”

Lucas shrugs and finally goes back to his own paper. "I told you. You two are acting weird. And when you two fight the whole Party wigs out."

"We're not fighting."

"Maybe tell Will that."

Mike taps his pencil on the paper, not thinking about Mayans anymore.

"Hey," Mike calls, and Will's head turns.

"Hey."

Late afternoon sunlight slants into the school through the windows, turning the whole front lobby sweltering with muggy, golden heat despite the wind chill outside. The school is comfortably empty, but not deserted; signs of life echo from every hallway. Teachers and office staff finishing up work. After-school clubs chattering from behind propped-open doors. A lone oboe honking forlornly somewhere down the band hallway. And the drama club and track team, which conveniently adjourn around the same time every Monday and Wednesday.

Mike hoists himself up from where he had been leaning against a wall, waiting.

"Want a ride?"

Maybe Will hesitates just a second longer than usual. Or maybe it's Mike's imagination. Either way, it's over before he can really think about it.

"Sure." They meet in the middle of the lobby and make a beeline for the doors. "Any prop catastrophes today?"

"Sadly, no. Anna did almost fall off the stage, though. She forgot where the edge was."

"You guys are practicing onstage now?"

“Just starting to, yeah. Anyone throw up?”

“Nope.”

“Whoa, that’s like, a whole week straight of no one barfing. Isn’t that a record?”

Will nudges him with a grin. “ No. It was literally one time. You make it seem like people are projectile-vomiting every time we get on the track.”

“Is that not what happens? Because I feel like that sums up running pretty well.”

“Speak for yourself, noodle-legs.”

Mike tries to act offended. Then he cracks up.

“I’m sorry, *what* -legs?”

“Just saying. You can’t run for shit.”

“Okay, but I can still pick up Melissa Eaton and twirl her around in full costume, and I’ll have you know that those costumes are not light or easy to move in.”

They’re halfway across the parking lot, a biting wind slipping right over Mike’s collar and down his shirt, making him shiver. Will, with his jacket thrown on over his track clothes, has goosebumps up and down his neck. He looks at Mike sideways as they arrive at the Wheeler’s second car. It was Nancy’s, before she went to college. Now Mike drives it, provided his mother doesn’t need it for something that day. It’s an ugly, slant-nosed Toyota, half-broken-down already and painted an odd shade of taupe. The cloth seats have rips and cigarette burns in them from past drivers; it coughs and whines if it has to start up in the cold; his father bought it fifth-hand from a work friend. Mike loves it.

“You cannot lift Melissa Eaton. She’s, like, as tall as you.”

“I can. I have to. It’s part of the scene.”

There's a pause as Mike digs out the keys and unlocks the car, reaching through the open the passenger door from the inside. It doesn't open, otherwise. Then Will simply says, "Huh," and climbs in.

They pull around the school, where Will hops out and grabs his bike from the rack, shoving it unceremoniously into the back of the car. Months of practice have made the awkward feat second nature, and soon they're bumping out of the parking lot and away from the school.

The car is slow to pick up speed, and they're still trundling along at a nice, easy, torturously slow grandma-pace when they pass the tree. Mike stares at it until he has to face the road again or risk crashing. Something about that tree makes his mind hyper-focus on Will. The seat of the car suddenly feels like cool, damp bark beneath him, and he shifts. This is the first time they've been alone since yesterday. The first time they've had any privacy since Mike read the letter.

They come to a stop sign and Mike lingers, checking the road to his right for a couple seconds extra. Will just so happens to be right beside the window. So Mike can't be blamed for the way his gaze wanders for a moment.

That's how it's always been. He just happens to be looking at Will. He just happens to develop warm cheeks and a funny feeling in the pit of his stomach for no particular reason. It's all accidental. Doesn't mean anything. Can't mean anything.

It doesn't have to be like that, the annoying, persistent little voice whispers to him, and just like he has for the whole night and day, he firmly ignores it.

But it's no use. That causeless blush and warm fluttering is back.

Will is slumped back in the worn seat, toying idly with the radio controls. Hawkins can pick up maybe four stations, on a good day, and currently all of them are either playing advertisements or talking about the weather. A small frown draws Will's brows together. He likes listening to music in the car. That, at least, has never changed.

Other things certainly have, though. Will isn't quite the same small-

ish boy that miraculously came back to life in 1983. His distinctive bowl cut is a thing of the past. He got sick of it early in Freshman year. A trim, some gel, and that was that. He parts it to the side, now, sweeping his bangs off to the side instead of leaving them in a ruler-straight line across his forehead. Even now, after a long and windy track meeting, his hair frames his face in a soft fringe. The gel he uses to keep it in place gave up long ago, and his bangs are falling across his forehead, damp with sweat.

Mike turns the corner.

His face. Will's face has changed a little, too. It's just a tad broader, perhaps, or maybe it's just the more mature features that make it seem like that. He's always had features that somehow, impossibly straddled the line between soft and sharp.

But despite the lean, strong limbs developed from years of running, and the unobtrusively handsome haircut, and the steady growth spurt that still left him three inches shorter than Mike - despite all that, Mike can never look at Will and not see the same boy he befriended when they were chubby and scrawny five-year-olds, respectively. He looks at Will and sees his partner; nothing simpler or more complicated than that. His field-trip buddy. His ally. His best friend. His go-to. The one person he's been closest to for most of his life. Hazel eyes, chestnut-brown hair, two small moles just off-center of his adam's apple.

Normally, Mike would have put the brakes on this train of thought long ago. He would have squeezed it into the far corner of his mind and forced himself to open his mouth and chatter about anything else. Today, he watches the outskirts of Hawkins roll by, and he eases into the thought like a hot tub. It leaves him just as warm, heart stretching happily within its usually-restrictive confines in his chest.

Will, with his never-dying fondness for flannel shirts, and his colored pencils always tucked away in his backpack, and his ever-changing green-brown eyes that see much more than he lets on. Will, who always tries to tell the truth, even when it's not advantageous to him. Will, with his quiet courage and nimble fingers and exuberant hugs in moments of victory. Will, who likes him. Who has a crush on him. Will, his best friend since they were five. Who Mike...

He white-knuckles the steering wheel, tells himself not to be a pussy, and thinks it.

Will, who Mike has a crush on. His crush. His crush who asked him to be his boyfriend.

“You okay?”

Mike pulls himself back into the present, instantly thankful that he’s driven this path so many times he could do it with his eyes closed. Like an old horse, his shitty, perfect little first car knows the way. They’re just coming up to the turn onto the Byers’ long driveway.

“Yeah, sorry. Deep in thought.”

Just like the whole rest of the day.

Will doesn’t even nod. And suddenly, Mike knows: they’re both thinking about the letter. Will knows, somehow, that he read it. That confession, that offer - it’s out in the silence between them, taking up space, filling up the car. It’s a slippery kind of feeling, like trying to push two positive ends of a magnet together. It’s there, hanging in the air, clear and bright as the color of the envelope itself, but neither can manage to say anything about it.

Saturday, Mike reminds himself. At 2:00pm. At Castle Byers. Where you absolutely cannot meet him. You already decided. It could ruin everything.

He can’t risk that.

Which reminds him -

“I’m not mad,” he blurts, and Will turns for the first time to look straight at him.

“What?”

They’re pulling up to the Byers’ front lawn, but Will makes no move to get out. Mike puts the car in park and does his best to meet his best friend’s gaze.

“I’m not mad. At you,” he clarifies. “I’m sorry if it seemed... I mean...

I was kind of a jerk. Today. And yesterday. I shouldn't have turned off my radio, that was stupid. I wasn't trying to ignore you."

There's an expression on Will's face that Mike can't quite place. His lips quirk up in a small smile and his head tilts, like he's contemplating something. If Mike had to put a name to it, he'd almost say that Will looks *hopeful*.

"Yeah. You were kind of a jerk." The expression breaks into a normal smile. "I probably was too."

Mike shrugs.

That slippery push-pull flits between them again, something understood but unsaid, unacknowledged.

Just as fast, something else surges abruptly to the front of Mike's mouth. It pushes past his molars and stops short just behind his lips. He drops back into his seat and wonders when exactly he leaned so far over the center console. Heart kicking at his ribs, he swallows what he had been about to say. It doesn't go down without a fight.

Not yet, he tells himself. *It's not time yet.*

Not time ever, he corrects himself.

But are you sure? Are you sure?

In a haze, he mutters, "See ya," waits for Will to retrieve his bike from the back, and gets halfway home before he can really breathe easy.

By the time he reaches his bedroom and slumps down at his desk, he's reached a decision. He can't keep doing this. He can't keep avoiding it forever. He is not his father. He's not a coward. He's not going to run away from it; clearly, he can't. It just keeps catching up to him, especially after yesterday.

So he's going to face it. However it ends, he'll face it. It's the least he can do. He can't keep lying to himself again and again and again and again, pretending that nothing is happening. Not after he came so fucking close to saying everything in the car just now. Like shells on

a lakebed stirred up by a storm, Will's letter stirred up everything Mike has worked so hard to keep hidden. And just now, lurking so close to the surface, they almost broke free again.

I wanted to kiss him.

It's a fact and a realization at the same time. Sitting there under the early-spring branches of the Byers' front yard, in his sister's hand-me-down car, something in him wanted nothing more than to lean over the parking brake and -

He jumps to his feet and paces. Paces. Paces.

-I like your face

- Your lips are

Then he sits down. He pulls a sheet of paper from his backpack, and he clicks a mechanical pencil a few times. And he writes. No lies, no hesitation. Just words from his brain onto a piece of paper. Like drafting for a campaign or a story. He writes faster than he can think, so he doesn't have to analyze the words too much.

Things I like about you:

You're inquisitive and curious and smart

You're shorter than me. I know you hate that, but I've always found it kind of cute. Sorry.

You gesture with your hands a lot when you get excited

You seem so innocent, but then once in a blue moon you say something that shocks just about everyone and it's amazing and usually hilarious

You doodle everywhere, on everything, all the time

You're always right there by my side no matter what, even when I don't really deserve it.

You sing to yourself sometimes if you're deep in thought or off in your own world, usually drawing

You're handsome

(Note: I think you may be actively trying to kill me because I might be having a heart attack writing this right now. This is your fault. I blame you for this.)

I can talk to you. Ever since we were kids, that's been something I've liked. We can tell each other things.

You're always collecting little things like polaroids and bottle caps and movie tickets

You're always really kind and accepting of people no matter what

You're brave. (You are. Stop saying you're not.)

I never know exactly what's going on in your head. It's interesting. I can just tell there are a lot of deep thoughts happening up there. I hope that doesn't sound creepy.

You're always looking at the stars. You love outer space. I think if you could you'd live up there.

You love music so much

You're

Mike pauses, trying to phrase what he wants to say. Resilient? A survivor? Yes, but that's not what he wants to say. Will is light. He's full of light. He always has been. Even after everything, he never stopped shining. He never lost that gentleness, that kindness. After pain and suffering and loneliness and darkness, he still got up and smiled again. He still gives people the benefit of the doubt, when he can; he still believes that people are inherently good, and that

tomorrow can be brighter.

You're light, Mike writes, but in a moment of stupid, cheesy, heartfelt affection, erases it with a smudge and writes instead, *You're my sunshine*.

He spends about a minute looking over the list, nods curtly to himself, and then says aloud, "Fuck you."

Because this is getting more difficult than he thought.

Notes for the Chapter:

As always, I would love to hear your thoughts!

5. A Wordless Conversation and A Fitful Dream

There are three ways this can go, Will figures.

The most likely, based upon what he knows about Mike, is that Mike will show up at Castle Byers on Saturday to gently but firmly let him down. He'll stop two arm length's away and look at Will with those big, sad eyes and shake his head and say, "I'm sorry, but I just don't see you that way. I can't. I wouldn't. Now, please never mention this again and let's go back to how things were." And Will will say, *I know. I'm sorry. Okay.* But they can't go back to how things were. Not completely.

Door Number Two: Mike will show up at Castle Byers on Saturday, furious. He'll yell and gesture and spit accusations like he does when he's *really* mad. "What the hell is wrong with you? I trusted you. I thought you were my friend. But the whole time you've been *crushing* on me? Ugh! I can't believe you! Just get away from me. Don't fucking touch me." And Will will not cry. He won't. Not if Mike calls him all the worst names he can think of, not if he shoves him down, not if he says he never wants to see Will again. He won't cry. He'll stand with his head high until Mike runs out of steam, like he usually does, and then he'll try to explain - to salvage what he can of their friendship. If he even wants to at that point.

The last possibility: Mike won't show up at all. Saturday will come and go and they'll go on as they have been, pretending nothing ever happened. Like they have been for the last two days. They'll just stay floating in this strange limbo forever, each knowing but neither bringing it up. Honestly, that would probably be for the best, but something about the idea makes Will frown. He traces the eraser of his pencil along his lower lip, staring right through the board and wondering why the least painful option seems like the worst.

With Will's luck, it'll be the second set of events that comes to pass. It's probably what he deserves.

But after yesterday...

Maybe he doesn't hate me.

Mrs. Ramos' voice tilts up in a question and Will pops back into reality for a second, making sure she's not calling on him. She's not. She's waiting for Jennifer to produce an answer. Will lowers his pencil and scratches at his paper like he's taking notes. The rough outline of a hallway takes shape and he starts filling in details. Bookshelves. The hallway becomes a library.

This morning, Lucas located Will between classes and reported, "I asked Mike if he was mad at you - don't make that face, I didn't mention anything you said - and he said no. So either he didn't read whatever it was that you wrote, or it wasn't as bad as you thought. Now, can you two make up and act normal again? We need our Paladin and Cleric back. Frodo and Sam. Captain America and Bucky. Whatever. You get it. Okay?"

Will adds a smattering of trees between the shelves, retreating off into the distance, and fusses with the perspective of a broken ceiling for a moment. Then he abandons the ceiling and goes back to the shelves instead.

I'm not mad. At you.

That's what Mike said. And Lucas confirmed it.

So either Mike truly isn't mad at him for... well, everything, or he never read the letter at all.

To Will's surprise, it's the latter thought that makes his chest tighten.

He glances up again, jots down a couple notes from the board, makes eye contact with Mrs. Ramos to show he's paying attention, and then starts blocking out the limbs of two dancers between the trunks and shelves.

He wants Mike to read the letter.

Will rolls the thought around in his mind, like a marble.

He *wants* Mike to read the letter. No matter what happens. Even though it scares him. Even though there are so many ways this could end horribly. He's not even quite sure why he wants it, but when he thinks of the possibility of the envelope sitting somewhere, unopened

and unread, disappointment curls up in the pit of his stomach.

The dancers are too small to add much detail, but Will gives the girl a skirt and the boy a vest. The boy is twirling her high above his head, like in the ballet his mom took him and Jonathan to see in the City last year.

Will is still kind of impressed that Mike can lift Melissa Eaton. Not that Melissa is fat or anything; she isn't. She's just a tall girl, and not especially bird-boned, and... well, it's fucking impressive, okay? It's impressive. Anyone would be impressed. Anyone would start to wonder what it would be like to be in Melissa's place. Anyone would, just for a moment, imagine big hands and dark curls and -

The yellowing LED rectangle overhead gives a fitful flicker. Will's hand pauses over his paper. It's easier, after a few years, to push past the instinctive flinch. He can almost ignore it. It's old muscle-memory. Something carved deep into that primitive, reactive stem of his brain. The lights flicker, and his mind hisses, *it's coming*. But it's okay. He's not thirteen anymore; malfunctioning electronics don't send him into a tailspin.

Which is lucky, because the whole school seems to have come down with a bad case of gremlins. Practically every electronic thing Will has seen today has been malfunctioning. The calculator that spat out a string of random numbers before abruptly running out of batteries. The phone in the office that rang once, briefly, only to have a confused office aid greet silence on the other end. The electric keyboard in the band hallway, folded up and packed away in its cloth case for relocation, which gave a sputtering off-key chord just as Will passed. And now, the light above him.

Will would be worried, if it wasn't for El. She's been perfectly calm and cheerful all day. Is something was wrong - if something was happening - she'd know before anyone else. But she smiles at Will whenever they pass each other, and Will trusts that. He trusts her. She'd be on alert if anything Upside-Down-related was going on, and she's not, so it's either gremlins or Will's imagination.

The bell rings, and the metal door frame shocks him as he brushes past on the way to lunch.

Mike is staring.

And this time, Will *definitely* isn't imagining it.

When questioned (repeatedly), Mike simply shakes himself and repeats some variation of, "Just deep in thought."

It's about the letter. Will knows it is. Mike's thinking about the letter, and he's thinking about it a *lot*. It can't be anything else - can it? Especially not after yesterday, when Mike came *this* close to actually mentioning it.

I'm not mad.

So, there's no denying it anymore, no hoping - fearing? - that maybe, just maybe, Mike never did open that envelope. That shred of hope is gone. Mike read it. He knows everything. Right now, at this very moment, as he stares at Will from across the lunch table, Mike knows that Will is queer, and that he has a crush on him, and he knows about almost all of Will's other crushes and how the Upside Down haunts him more than their friends really know, and that Will wants a boyfriend and -

A sick, cold, wriggling panic runs through him, like eels have taken up residence in his guts. Mike knows *everything*. But, strangely, there's a spark of excitement there, too. It's like clicking up the steep incline at the beginning of a roller coaster in the City, watching the peak grow nearer, knowing that the drop is coming. Thinking, *This is it. Here it comes*. There's fear, yes, but also anticipation. Excitement. Impatience.

Mike's eyes are still on him. He's obviously trying to be subtle or sneaky about it, but he's not doing a very good job. Will can sense his gaze like a hot beam of light on his forehead.

Feeling suddenly bold, Will looks up. He expects Mike to look away just as quickly, as he has for the past couple days. But he doesn't. Something in Will goes limp and pleasantly shivery, and the bite of sandwich on his tongue goes dry. He swallows with difficulty. Mike is looking at him - not just *looking* at him, but *seeing* him. Looking right

into his eyes, intense and searching and open, the way Will has always wanted him to. The way that friends definitely *don't* . And still Mike doesn't look down. Static crawls through Will's clothes, making them cling, popping quietly as he shifts.

And they know. Simple as that. They both know, and they know that the other knows. In that long, wordless glance, there's a strangely intimate sense of silent communication. Mike's brown eyes, usually so dark and bottomless, are lit up by a stripe of sunlight from a window. They dance with layers of color in the light. Rich, warm browns and ambers, bare hints of gold, tiny streaks of almost-black that radiate out across the iris. Will starts mixing shades and tones in his mind's eye even as his paralyzed arms prickle with chills. Mike. Mike, with his kind, earnest eyes, the color of fur and fragrant bark and black coffee. The eyes as familiar as his own; eyes that crinkled in a nervous smile, over eleven years ago, when Mike walked up to the swings and said, "*Hi! I'm Mike, short for Michael. Do you want to be my friend?*"

Will feels inexplicably exposed, as if he's naked in the middle of the cafeteria. He feels as if Mike is looking straight through his own eyes and into his mind, having a conversation without a single sound. His knee brushes a table leg and the static cling manifests as an audible spark. Will barely blinks.

I know, Mike's eyes seem to say. I know what you said. I know what you are.

And Will is the first to look down.

He stuffs another bite of his sandwich into his mouth. The peanut butter and jelly may as well be paper shreadings for how much he can taste them.

He doesn't know what Mike will do. That's the scary part. Mike is always so full of everything, bursting with it. Thoughts, emotions, ideas, memories, feelings. It's why he writes, sometimes. He told Will that at a sleepover, far past midnight. And now Will can't tell if those dark, oh-so-familiar eyes are full of repressed anger or bewilderment or disgust or something else. All he knows is that there was *something* bubbling, boiling just under Mike's attempt at an impassive

expression. Something strong.

Will's gaze flickers up, hoping to catch it again, but Mike is joking around with Max, the moment having already passed.

Except.

Except for the delicate, definite flush coloring the tips of his artfully curved cheekbones.

Will's heart begins to pick up pace.

Is there a door number four?

This is the question that loops in Will's mind for the rest of the day.

Is there a door number four? Another option? A chance?

Gentle let-down; fury; no-show. These were the options that Will saw. The only ways he could imagine Saturday going. But ever since that moment at lunch, he's been thinking. Hoping. Stupidly, pointlessly hoping. But the tiny inkling of hope won't die; it burns small and steady like a candle flame in the cage of his ribs all the way through last period.

What if...

The after-school crowd rampages down the main hallway. Will lets it carry him. It's Thursday; no track, no AV Club. Just him and his bike and the ride home and his thoughts.

What if he...

The volume and chaotic motion are becoming overwhelming, and Will ducks into the bathroom, choosing a stall just for a moment of relative quiet.

What if Mike...

Guys circulate in and out of the restroom fairly quickly, eager to escape the school premises. Sinks, soap pumps, voices and footsteps

blur into a steady stream of noise.

What if there's a fourth option?

It's stupid. Mike is clearly straight. Not three hours ago Will caught him glancing down at a girl's ass as she passed by. Will snorts.

But.

But there was that blush.

Wishful thinking on Will's part, of course. There's no way that Mike could possibly...

But maybe.

Maybe, on Saturday, Mike will show up. And say yes.

Pencil, pen and permanent marker cover the stall door edge-to-edge. Swear words and dick doodles, mostly, intermixed with complaints about homework, one pentagram, a knock-knock joke or two, and gossip.

Just above the handle, someone has scratched, *fags go to hell* into the paint. The lines are hard, damage running right down to the metal. They probably used a key, or a pocket knife. No erasing that one.

Will leaves the stall and washes his hands on autopilot. He doesn't wait for any of the others. He just gets on his bike and leaves. He pedals with the wind, half-standing, his backpack thumping him on the spine.

As a kid, he always kind of assumed he'd be alone. The universe seemed to shove it in his face over and over and over. That happy young married couple kissing in the grocery store? Not for you. Valentines' secret admirer notes? None for you. Mike and Dustin and Lucas chattering bashfully about their crushes? Can't relate. The burning, all-encompassing Power of Love, capital-L, that movies claim can overcome anything and everything? Kisses and grand gestures, linked hands and dates? Nope. Not for you. Not unless you want all that with a girl - which you don't.

Over time he fostered vague hopes of finding someone like him in college, when he could start over somewhere far from this little town. But college seems so far away and abstract that it's less of a comfort than empty words, whispered to himself when he's curled up in bed so lonely he could be sick. Those are the worst nights. When he tries to tell himself, *It's okay, you're okay, you'll find someone in college in some big city where things are better. Isn't that how it goes? Just hang on a couple more years.*

But a couple more years may as well be a couple more decades. He can't even begin to imagine life outside of Hawkins, outside of these school walls; it just doesn't feel possible, somehow, even though that's stupid. It's real - it *will* be real - but it's so far away. Those half-formed hopes are as out of reach as the stars.

He glides down a small hill and the wheels skid slightly. His knuckles whiten on the handles.

Out of reach as the stars.

Except. Except maybe not. *Maybe.*

It's a tiny, sputtering spark of hope. But it's close. Close enough to touch if he reaches out. Not two decades away, not two years away, but two *days*.

Holy shit.

Just two days.

And now Will has hope. And that terrifies him. Because he knows perfectly well how small his chances are, and he knows exactly how much it will crush him if (when) that hope is destroyed. At least when there was no hope, there was nothing to lose.

He rides in circles for a few moments, debating going straight back and finding Mike and getting this whole thing over with. He doesn't, of course. He straightens his path and continues on towards home. Part of him just isn't ready (will never be ready, ever, ever). But part of him, admittedly, likes this feeling. The hope. The first real hope he's had in a long time. He likes holding onto it, feeling its warmth.

He doesn't want Saturday to come, with all its harsh realities. He wants to stay like this.

The final stretch is coming up, and Will pushes forward savagely. He's not really in *that* much of a hurry to get home; he just likes the cut of cool air against his cheeks, and the limp-noodle feeling of exhaustion right after an intense ride.

Noodle-legs, he thinks, and grins into the wind at the memory of Mike's affronted grunt. He jolts to a stop right at the porch and lets himself in, making a bee-line for his room. He hollers a brief hello to his mother and shuts the door behind him.

Mike's giggle is still echoing in his head. That damn, adorable little giggle he does when he's trying to suppress the laughter but just can't help it. And it's so easy for Will to let his smile grow into a big, dopey grin at just the thought.

God, I love him, that idiot.

That's the thing about Mike. He's easy to love.

Not Will.

Will thinks of himself as something half-wild, sometimes. There's much more darkness in him than a lot of people realize. He's hard to love. He's a lot of work to be friends with, much less in a relationship with. He can be paranoid about stupid things, he has panic attacks sometimes, he occasionally has a very dark sense of humor, he's *strange*. He can be indecisive and a little snappish - a bad habit developed when everyone treated him like he was fragile and he became increasingly agitated by it.

But it's not just that. He's full of teeth and shadows, not just clinging to him from the Upside Down - an invisible grime he can never scrub off - but something that comes from inside him. Maybe part of it is from those two dark autumns, but not all of it. He's been so lonely for so long - he feels so isolated - that he thinks he would be too clingy if he actually had a boyfriend. Possessive, maybe. Or maybe just too intense, enough to be off-putting.

He has these moments, sometimes. Usually sometime late at night when he can't sleep and his mind is wandering more than he'd normally allow. Moments where he wants to *take* and *mark* and *claim*. Even if - *if*, and that's a big if - Mike said yes, surely he'd be put off by just how *much* Will wants. No, not just put-off. Disgusted. He'd be disgusted if he knew that on those late nights, sometimes, Will reaches under the covers and his head swims with the image of dragging his tongue up the column of a throat, sucking hickeys into neck and jaw and shoulder, backing his lover up against a wall, digging his hands up into short, silky hair and gathering fistfuls of it, *pulling* -

He wants to *make* his lover gasp, *make* him toss his head back, *make* him turn to putty in Will's hands -

He imagines Mike going meek and pliant under his touch and has to consciously push back the warmth pooling low in his belly.

Stop it, he tells himself, and switches on his radio with a sharp jab of his finger.

He parks himself at his desk, which has been half-heartedly re-assembled, and stares blankly at the chapter he's supposed to be reading for class. The announcers chatter about the weather with faux cheer, and then segue into the next song with a pun. A halfway-familiar piano chord starts the song, and Will bounces his knee to the beat. He doesn't know the tune very well, but he's heard it before. He hums along until the lyrics catch his attention about halfway through.

"Said, hey little boy you can't go where the others go; cause you don't look like they do," the singer - Bruce something, Will thinks - is saying. *"Said, hey old man how can you stand; to think that way? Did you really think about it; before you made the rules? He said, son; that's just the way it is; Some things will never change; That's just the way it is; Ah, but don't you believe them."*

What if.

Will swears to himself, then and there, that he'll be careful. If - *if* - Mike says yes - which he won't - Will swears he'll take it slow. Keep

himself reigned in. He can't ruin his only, tiny chance by being too much. And he doesn't think he could stand it if he ended up driving Mike away.

The clock on Mike's nightstand reads 11:42PM in blocky, red numbers. As he stares, it blinks to 11:43PM.

In seventeen minutes, it'll be Friday. The day before Saturday.

He turns over so he can't see the vivid red glow.

Something happened at lunch. He can't quite put a word to it, but... *something* happened. Ever since that moment when Will looked up, and met Mike's eyes, and didn't look away, something in their dynamic has shifted. Like stones settling minutely into place, shifting positions just a hair to get to a more stable configuration. Through the rest of the day, something was clearly *off*. Different. Not like when they had been arguing. It's not a *bad* -different, just... different. Mike sifts through the day, straining to find some pattern. Did Will look over at him more often than usual during shared classes? Did they talk more? Less? Did they stand just a centimeter closer than normal, or were they a little farther apart? He can't tell. Nothing about the second half of the school day was *obviously* different. It went by just as Thursdays always do. Slow as molasses, with Friday tantalizing yet impossibly far away on the horizon. But there was something.

A feeling, Mike decides. The *something* was a feeling.

It felt like there was something tangible in the air between them, connecting them even in different classrooms. Even now. Will vanished right after school, not even hanging around to chat with the Party, but Mike imagines that he can still feel it. It's as if there are dozens of invisible strings tying him and Will together, point-by-point, connecting each of their fingers and limbs and torsos and - lips. He feels them pulling. He felt them pulling all day. And Mike knows that if he had surrendered to it and let them reel him in, they'd have ended up sealed together head-to-toe.

He's a little shaken by how appealing that is to him. It's so very

tempting to line himself up with his lifelong best friend, toes to heads, and press together and just hold on, breathing together.

A hug, he tells himself dryly. What you're thinking about is a hug. Moron.

But friends don't hug like that. Not even best friends, and not even best friends of almost a dozen years who have been to literal hell and back together.

That's how it's always been, like Will said in his letter: the two of them against the world. Mike can't risk that. He's never had to function without his best friend at his side. What would he do if he lost that? What would happen? What would change? No, he can't risk his best friend, not even for - well. For more. No matter how much he wants -

But it doesn't matter, he reminds himself harshly. Who cares what you want? You already decided. This is stupid. Just go to sleep and stop thinking about it.

Despite his best efforts, it takes another hour. His dreams are vivid and restless.

The boy leans over to say something to Will, who laughs into the lip of his Sprite can.

They're at the Quarry, swimming - which should be strange, since they've never done that before. The Party mostly avoids the place, after that one awful night in 1983. But here they are. The Party, plus one other. Tall, possibly blonde, ambiguously handsome. Sitting next to Will, close enough for their thighs to touch.

Mike is holding a soda can of his own. He swirls the liquid, feeling dejected. Dustin and Lucas are off a little ways having a friendly lightsaber battle. Max cheers from the sidelines. El is swimming; her hair is about three feet long, apparently, the mass of curls straightened slightly by moisture. It floats in the water around her. When she climbs out, sleek and nimble as an otter, it clings to her arms and sides.

“Don’t pout,” she reprimands with a gentle elbow to Mike’s side.

“I’m not,” he counters, and she fixes him with one of her signature looks.

Mike shrugs and looks back to Will. And Will’s boyfriend.

Right. That’s who he is.

Lucas wins the lightsaber battle and Max comes jogging back, laughing, having claimed a saber for herself. El scrambles up to duel her. Dustin wanders past, glances down at Mike, and says, “That’s what happens when you don’t eat enough eggs, you know.”

Mike nods sagely and takes a sip of his soda. Makes sense.

Will and The Boy are still talking. It’s a nice day, and the Party is happy. But Mike can’t enjoy himself. The live concert that has appeared on the other side of the quarry starts playing a familiar chord progression, and Will hums along to Bruce Hornsby and The Range. Mike almost smiles. Will has always done that. Hummed along to himself, especially with tunes he likes. But the smile is stopped in its tracks when The Boy leans in and pops a quick kiss right on Will’s lips.

Mike twists, suddenly afraid that someone could have seen, but the others are all busy. When he turns back, The Boy is looking at him.

“All clear?” he asks, and Mike knows, all at once, that this is the arrangement. Mike looks out for them; keeps their secret for them. For Will.

“All clear,” he answers back dully.

Will casts him a distracted, grateful smile, watching the distant lazer show of the concert. He looks happy. He is happy. He reaches for The Boy’s hand and interlinks their fingers.

Mike’s stomach folds in on itself until it’s not much more than a small, tight wad of tissues.

Max stabs El with a purple lightsaber. El giggles, unconcerned, and floats away.

3:29AM.

Mike stares through the red miasma, face close to the display, until his eyes adjust. He woke up with an aching stomach and a dry mouth.

It's not even late enough to get up yet. Damnit. Who knew he'd ever be so eager for 6:00 to come? He'd even take 5:30 at this point. Just as long as he doesn't have to deal with sporadic, fitful bursts of sleep punctuated with... whatever that was.

With a groan, he rolls out from underneath the covers and goes in search of a glass of water. He tiptoes past Nancy's room out of habit, only remembering that she's gone when he passes the wide-open door.

The feeling from the dream has followed him into real life. A creeping, bone-deep *wrongness*. Not because of the real-life lightsabers or the randomly-appearing live concert in the middle of the woods, or even Dustin's nonsensical comment; that all made perfect sense while he was asleep. No, it was the extra addition to the Party that left such a stale taste in his mouth. Will's boyfriend. The one that made Will laugh and kissed him and held his hand and -

Fuck him.

Mike stumbles over his own feet slightly in the dark and gropes his way down the stairs. Pointless, ridiculous anger is building in his gut.

Seriously, fuck that guy.

The Guy wasn't the worst part, though. The worst part was that Will was happy. Mike feels instant, crushing guilt as soon as the thought crosses his mind, but it's true. The stranger with ambiguous features kissed Will, and Will was happy with him. Not with Mike, but with *him* - Random Dream Guy.

The ice cubes are sticky-cold, clinging to the skin of Mike's fingers as he scoops them out of the freezer by touch alone and drops them into a plastic cup.

He stands in front of the open freezer for way too long, another

thought coming along to sharpen his sleep-addled mind instantaneously.

What happens if I say no?

He had never considered it before now. If - no, when - he doesn't show up at Castle Byers on Saturday. What then? He imagines Will waiting at 2:00, checking his watch, realizing slowly that Mike isn't coming. The knot in his stomach returns tenfold. But Will would recover; he'd get over Mike. He's resilient like that. He'd be fine. Without Mike. He'd find someone else. And Mike...

Mike would have to watch his crush, his best friend, the person most important to him in the whole world move on without him.

A tense tenderness builds in the pit of his throat. He swallows. His nose feels like it's swelling. He swallows again. Sniffs. Clenches his teeth and looks up at the dark ceiling until it fades by a degree or two.

He remembers, far too late, to close the freezer and add water to his cup of ice.

He misses Nancy. If she was here, she'd gripe at him while making hot chocolate and gently bully him into telling her what was wrong. And what would he tell her? That he's sad because he dreamed that his best friend was dating another guy, oh, and furthermore, Mike wants to punch the Imaginary Dream Guy in his Imaginary Dream Face for kissing Will?

The green clock on the oven draws his attention as he starts to head back upstairs. 3:36.

It's Friday, he thinks. Tomorrow's the day.

Notes for the Chapter:

As always, I'd love to hear about your favorite parts or what you think or whatever! Thank you for reading, love you all :)

6. Between the Shelves

It's like the day before a big vacation. Or the day before a holiday. Or a birthday-eve. Except, you know, infinitely more nerve-wracking and uncertain. Mike spends the whole day acutely aware that tomorrow is *the day*.

El spends the whole day being increasingly annoyed with him.

"Mike," she says in that half-dangerous way, voice hardening as her face tilts down just a degree. "What's going on?"

"Nothing is going on," he insists yet again.

She folds her hands directly over the warm-up for their only shared class and leans towards him. She's already completed it, half a page scribbled out in her distinctive, neat half-cursive that she picked up from Hop. Mike managed two and a half sentences before getting distracted by his thoughts again.

"Mike."

"El."

Her lips press together in an *I'm not amused* expression. "Something is happening," she states, flatly. "And no one will tell me."

Mr. Anderson drifts past and Mike ducks his head, scribbling out another couple of lines. Then he lets out a long breath between pursed lips and flops back in his seat.

It's not that he wants to keep this a secret from El. She knows practically all his secrets already, anyway, and of course she'd understand if he explained everything. She's always understood, even when they were wide-eyed twelve-year-old kids running after monsters in the woods. But this whole... *situation* feels so new, so fragile, like the first glossy film of ice on a pond. Like if anyone puts so much as a finger of pressure on it, the whole thing will buckle and fragment and melt away into nothing. And it's *so close* now - tomorrow - tomorrow is the day -

"Mike," El says again, gently this time. Her hand finds the crook of his elbow and he turns to meet her warm brown eyes. There's a tension there, betraying her annoyance, but it's overridden by concern. "You've kind of been ignoring me. And the rest of the Party."

Guilt quietly ties a knot somewhere just above Mike's diaphragm, and he scowls down at his paper again. He's been so wrapped up in his own problems, and in Will, that he's been neglecting his other best friend.

"Geez, sorry," he mutters a bit more sharply than he meant.

El tugs at his arm, but he pretends to be working on the warm-up.

"Is it about Will?" she presses, and he glares at her petulantly. Because of *course* she's right, but he doesn't want to admit that. "Why are you fighting?"

"We're not fighting!" Mike bursts out, and several heads turn. He tosses his pencil down and lowers his voice. "We're not fighting. I told Lucas that, I told *Will* that, why do people keep saying it?"

Mr. Anderson takes a half-breath, but his thermos of coffee topples over before he can move the lesson forward. He swallows a curse and dives for it, snatching papers out of the way, and El plucks a tissue from her backpack.

"Because," she says, voice slightly muffled behind the tissue pressed under her nose. She wads it up quickly, hiding the daub of bright red, and lobs it towards the trash. It makes a small trajectory correction mid-flight, lands precisely in the bin, and a boy two rows away turns to give her an impressed thumbs-up.

"Because," she starts again, "I know you, and I know Will. I know something's wrong. I want to help."

Mike pouts for another five seconds. Then he caves. Those big, brown eyes always have been his weakness. And going around and around in circles in his own head is going to drive him crazy.

"Not here," he says. "Next period. Meet me at the maple tree?"

She nods without question. El doesn't have a study hall like Mike does, but she's never been too highly concerned with school rules. Plus, after the month and a half she spent living in the forest before Hop found her, she's a natural when it comes to climbing trees. So approximately sixty minutes later, it's no surprise when Mike finds her already settled at that convenient Y of branches. He joins her with some difficulty.

It's a damp and overcast day; not rainy yet, but heavy and dark with a fine haze of mist. El's jacket is wrapped tightly around her, the black leather studded with tiny droplets of moisture. She sits forward wordlessly.

Mike takes a deep breath, runs a hand through his hair, and starts talking.

The Party doesn't spend as much time together as they used to. Through the years, they've each gravitated towards their own respective social circles. Dustin seems to hop between science clubs; Lucas and Max have earned their place with a clan of cool kids; Will has track and hangs out with the art crowd on the regular; Mike made friends in drama club; and El, after a couple years of general hesitance and mistrust towards social interaction, has begun to pull together a motley group of her own. And yet, no matter how many months go by, they still seem to find themselves together every lunch period and every weekend. Like now, as they mill around in that holy ground of nerds: the bookstore just down from the corner of 6th and Clear River Cir.

Partly new, but mostly used, it seems to Mike that the bookstore hasn't changed since he was little. The nubbly brown-gray carpet is worn down the centers of the narrow aisles. The ceiling is a patchwork of yellowing tiles and square, low-wattage lights. The shelves don't seem to be arranged in any particular logical order, and the aisles form odd angles and corners to accommodate the shape of the building. Making your way through the space necessitates watching your step; random stacks of books, wooden stools, potted plants and one unexplained umbrella stand fill the aisles at intervals. Decades-old armchairs have been squeezed in wherever there's space, to encourage readers to stay and read (and, hopefully, buy).

The Party, on their way to the racks of comic books, has gotten sidetracked in the tiny front lobby. The day passed agonizingly slowly, but it's finally the weekend. School let out, the Party congregated in celebration, and now Mike smiles automatically at frail old Mrs. O'Reilly as she stands guard over her shop from the front desk. She grins toothlessly back, dismisses the group of teenagers as generally harmless, and goes back to very slowly dusting. She shuffles back and forth to the beat of the radio that's propped up next to the cash register.

Mike lifts his left wrist. 3:21pm. Less than twenty four hours left.

"This isn't even - you have to be, like, Einstein or something," Dustin gripes. "Or... Schrodinger."

The front of the store, along with all the shiny-new titles, is stocked with an eclectic array of non-book products to supplement income. Bookmarks, quirky mugs, pens, action figures, and some puzzle toys. Dustin twists one such puzzle between his hands, laughing as he shields it from Lucas's grasping fingers.

"No - no! I will do this. I will - oh, son of a bitch, I almost had it. Fine, here."

Lucas catches it with a laugh and Dustin storms off in a fake huff towards his original goal.

El grins at their antics and catches Mike's eye, and he grins back. But her smile fades, and her eyes flicker ever-so-slightly towards Mike's left, where Will is inspecting one of the new releases. Well, fairly new. Most of the "new releases" came out sometime last year, or even earlier, but Hawkins is always a few months late to the bandwagon. It must pass muster, because Will has finished scanning the blurb and is now leafing through it, eyes bright with interest.

Mike ducks to see the title. "What's that?"

Will tilts the book wordlessly, displaying an illustrated cover with orange and green script. *Seventh Son* by Orson Scott Card.

When he looks up again, Mike has a brief facial-expression-

conversation with El. She widens her eyes and glances to Will again; he frowns and shakes his head minutely. Her eyebrows lift. His lower. She tilts her head and flattens her lips. He rolls his eyes with an inhale.

Will's noncommittal hum puts an end to the silent argument. He closes the book and bounces it in his hands.

Mike tilts his head to read the blurb. "Gonna get it?"

"Maybe." He slides it back into place. "I'll keep an eye on it. Where'd the others go?"

"Comics," El answers succinctly, and departs with one last meaningful stare. Will watches her ponytail of curls bounce as she stomps off.

"What's up with her?"

Mike shrugs. "Dunno. Wanna see what's in Fantasy?"

Of course, he does know. *What's up with El* is that she thinks he's being an absolute stubborn moron. She thinks he's "*making up problems that aren't even there.*" Mike huffs silently - the closest he can come to a snort without Will hearing and turning around. *Problems that aren't even there.* Oh, they're there, all right. He sees two of them every day and calls them *Mom* and *Dad*. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. Maybe El did miss out on a lifetime of socialization, and maybe she is still acclimating to the particulars of society even years later, but she's smarter than to really think that. There's a reason she never mentioned her attraction to Max before that late night, after all. El can be inexperienced - even immature at times - but she's observant, and clever, and in a place like Hawkins it's impossible not to notice how people talk about girls who like girls. Or boys who like boys. Or how they're treated. She knows perfectly well it can't just be a matter of "*what you want.*"

She wouldn't listen to any of his other arguments, either.

"*It could change everything. It could ruin everything.*"

"*What are you talking about?*"

“Our... friendship. If it - if we - whatever. Whatever! Whatever happened, it would change... us, and I can’t lose him again.”

“It didn’t ruin you and me.”

“What?”

“We dated. We stopped. We’re still friends. Did it ruin us?”

“No, but -”

“Then why is this different?”

He didn’t answer her for a while, and eventually she extended one boot and nudged him.

“Mike. I understand. But if I got the chance? I would never waste it.”

Will has led them to one of the far corners of the shop, where a hand-painted wooden sign hangs from the ceiling:

<-- Science Fiction / Fantasy -->

They turn right, into the fantasy aisle. Especially in this far corner, the bookstore smells amazing. Like dust and wax and old, brittle paper and potted plants.

Mike fingertips drum along a shelf. He moves along slowly, staring at the rows of books, but he’s not absorbing any of the titles. El spent a lot of time at lunch hiding behind her book and glancing at Max’s hand linked with Lucas’s. Mike spent a lot of time glancing at Will. Her words wouldn’t leave his head.

“If I got the chance? I would never waste it.”

Somewhere in the front of the store, the radio squeals with a fit of static. Mike frowns. That’s been happening all week. He thought the school was having electrical issues, but now it’s here too. Or maybe that was just El being pissed off. Hard to tell.

Mrs. O'Reilly grumbles something, the exact words indistinct through the shelves, and a moment later a different song comes on at a higher

volume. It's one of the catchy, peppy ones that they've played absolutely to death already. Madonna, he's pretty sure.

Mike's hand slips over the spines, aiming for an emerald-green binding with a dragon on it. Will's hand lifts at the same time. A static shock jumps between them the moment their fingers bump and Will snatches his hand away like he's been stung.

"S-sorry," he stutters, but Mike shakes his head.

"Nah, that was probably me. I've been walking around on carpet with a sweater on."

Plus, it didn't hurt, just made his fingers tingle with an odd but not unpleasant warmth. He turns and -

Oh.

Mike's heart stutters in his chest, one hard beat marking out the moment. They're closer than he thought. Much closer. Will must have stepped just beside him to reach for the shelf, and now that they're facing each other there's barely two inches between them. Mike's weight teeters back and forth, caught between the instinct to step back with an apology and an instinct to lean closer. His center of gravity settles a heartbeat later. He hasn't stepped back - and neither has Will.

Faintly, Mike can still hear Madonna on the radio singing, *"If you gave me half a chance you'd see; My desire burning inside of me."*

Mike blinks. He can see his outline reflected in Will's wide eyes. Will seems as paralyzed as he is.

"If you gave me half a chance..."

I'm not asking for any promises, I'm not asking for forever or anything like that; all I'm asking is that you give me a chance.

Mike swears he can almost *feel* the warmth of Will's body heat, radiating out from the gap in his unzipped red and blue windbreaker. He doesn't mean to - really, he doesn't - but just for a second, he glances down to Will's lips. The clean, vaguely masculine scent of cheap ivory soap hangs around him. Will's scent.

Fuck.

Mike is *fucked*.

Will blinks a couple times and his lips part in a shallow inhale, as if he's about to say something. Mike's fingers twitch. It's like the car on Wednesday, but ten times worse. Mike wants -

He wants -

Will's stance shifts, just a hair closer, and *fuck*, Mike wants to kiss him. He wants to take one stride forward, pressing Will's shoulder blades into the dusty paperbacks, and dip his head down and -

Will's voice comes out low and a shade rougher than normal. "What?"

Mike's heart is pounding like a train piston and it echoes through his entire body. He swallows and speaks.

"It - I was - thinking."

Will's swallow makes his throat bob. He rocks like he's going to step back, but he doesn't. "Been doing a lot of that lately it seems."

"Yeah." Mike isn't really sure why he's half-whispering. It's not like the others can hear them. They're on the opposite side of the store, through dozens of bookshelves. They're alone. And Mike takes a spur-of-the-moment chance. "You know - I mean, I need - uh. I need to talk t-"

But Will's eyes have gone wide with panic, and his head gives a little shake. "Mike," he croaks, "just - just *wait*."

And with that he's gone, slipping away and around a corner silent and agile as a cat, leaving Mike with one hand still hovering in front

of the bookshelf, reaching for a book he's forgotten all about.

He drops his arm.

He's shaking. Almost imperceptibly, but he can feel it. In his gut, his chest, his throat.

That was the first time either of them have acknowledged it out loud.

Dustin dishes out coin after coin to pay for the small tower of comic books he found. He's grinning widely, exclaiming over each one as Mrs. O'Reilly patiently counts them.

The rest of the Party didn't seem to notice the paladin and cleric's temporary absence. Mike followed Will to the sound of overlapping voices and slipped into the center of the pack, joining in the conversation with little effort. Will had already busied himself arguing the merits of artstyle with Max, conveniently so absorbed in the glossy paper that he didn't even look up when Mike arrived.

El, of course, was the exception. Her gaze bore into the side of Mike's head with such intensity that he had to check her upper lip for blood.

Now after approximately half an hour of browsing, chatting, laughing, and general tomfoolery, the Party is gearing up to head their separate ways. It's been a homework-heavy week, and they all grumble vagaries about having to go home and work. At least half of them actually mean it. They groan and commiserate, and Mike feels halfway normal again. He and Will can actually look each other in the eyes as they joke around (and after the last thirty minutes, that's an achievement).

They're on their way out the door, dispersing into the cold afternoon, when Will pauses beside the bikes. Mike's mom needed the car for a grocery trip, and Lucas didn't end up driving the Sinclair van today either, so it's all-wheels-to-the-ground. Everyone stuffs their newfound treasures under their jackets or into their backpacks to protect them from the thickening drizzle. Will tucks *Seventh Son* away next to his sketchbook as Mike finds room for the two paperbacks he chose. He picked them mostly at random, too preoccupied to put

much care into his selection. One has an alien planet and a spaceship on the cover; the other features a winged woman holding an axe.

“Hey,” Will says, and Mike slings his backpack over his shoulder with a tilted head.

“Yeah?”

The others are departing one by one, in a hurry to get home and get out of the damp cold. Dustin cinches his hood tight, leaving only a small section of his face exposed, and hollers goodbye as he rides off. Lucas is close on his heels. El rides her own purple bike - her pride and joy, especially now that she's mastered it as well as the boys - around Max in circles, rearing to go. Max grumbles and whines, but eventually gets on her skateboard and starts off with a curse at the sky. She still won't shut up about how California never had such “awful, depressing weather,” even after living in Hawkins for years.

El's eyes flash over her shoulder one last time before the girls turn the corner.

Mike reaches for his bike with a half-awkward mumble of, “Well, see ya.”

Will's arms wrap around him before he can get on.

It takes him by surprise, but Mike reciprocates quickly. Will always has been a hugger - with his friends, at least - so it's not *that* unusual. But normally his hugs are reserved for moments of celebration or victory, like an A on an exam or the end of a campaign. That, or comfort. Will is always the first to wrap his arms around a distressed Party member.

But this is out of nowhere. And usually Will's hugs are short, paired with a grin and a fluttering pat on the back. Not this one. His slim arms wrap around Mike's ribs and squeeze tight, and Mike finds himself with an all-encompassing view of chestnut hair as Will presses his face into Mike's shoulder. Over the smell of rain and ivory soap - that goddamn ivory soap - Mike can just barely make out hints of shampoo. Something earthy and vaguely reminiscent of the forest.

“Goodbye,” Will says. It’s muffled in Mike’s layers of sweater and jacket, but there’s no misinterpreting it.

Mike’s arms tighten of their own accord. They never say “goodbye.” They just say “bye,” or “see ya,” or “later,” or whatever. Never “goodbye.”

He allows himself to press his nose into Will’s hair for barely a second before pulling back. He *has* to pull back, or else he’ll do something stupid again. And he already messed up enough in the Fantasy aisle.

He means to say something else, but Will doesn’t give him a chance. Almost mechanically, he hops onto his bike and swoops off down the hill. The tires fling up silver plumes of water. It’s starting to rain for real, now, instead of just spitting.

April showers bring May flowers, his mother’s voice pipes up amiably from somewhere in the back of his mind.

Mike grimaces as he gets on his own bike and coasts away from the warm yellow windows of O’Reilly’s New and Used Books. Of all the worst times to have a parent in your head.

But, strangely, the phantom voice of his mother doesn’t discourage him from his train of thought. Not this time. This time, instead of spiraling into a loop of, *I can’t do this, my parents would kill me, they’d find out somehow, it’s too risky, I can’t, I can’t do this*, Mike’s thoughts remain stuck on the hug. And on that moment in the narrow aisle, comfortably hemmed in by used paperbacks.

He finds himself, as he rides, daydreaming. Imagining what it would be like to cuddle Will on the sofa as they watch a movie. To hold his hand. Things they’ve never really done before, at least not since they were little, because guys don’t do that. They just don’t. Not even with their closest friends. Not like girls can. El and Max cuddle up together and hold hands all the time and no one gives a shit. Not even Max’s boyfriend. El has taken calculated advantage of this.

“Got to take what I can get,” she explained once with a shrug.

But more than that, Mike wants - his stupid heart gives another flip in his chest - he wants to be with Will. Really be with him. To go on dates and talk about everything and trade jackets.

To catch Will's jaw with one hand and tilt it up for a kiss, like he so fiercely wanted to half an hour ago.

"Fuck you," Mike says aloud, for the second time this week.

What a jerk, being all kind and amazing and handsome and making Mike fall for him. Making Mike turn into some form of sappy putty like his little sister around kittens. How dare he? What an absolute ass.

By 6:33pm, Mike is still thinking about it.

It's dinner time at the Wheeler house, and Karen and Ted are having a silent argument again. Each is giving the other the cold shoulder. Holly chatters. Karen talks to Holly. Ted talks to Holly. They don't talk to each other.

Mike's chin is on the heel of his hand, his gaze focused across the table at his mother's tense shoulders and his father's tired eyes. And all at once, thoughts of Will fade to the back of his mind, nudged aside by something else.

I don't want that, he thinks.

His parents hate each other. They hate each other. It's not so much a realization as a long-accepted fact that he rarely consciously acknowledges.

Ted and Karen Wheeler did everything they were supposed to. They got good grades and they graduated and they met a well-off office man and a pretty, capable young woman, respectively, and they settled down in a cookie-cutter house to raise their two and a half kids. They followed the rules. They played it safe.

And they're miserable. Quietly, desperately miserable in the midst of all the things money could buy them.

I don't want that, Mike thinks to himself, quietly, pushing green beans

across his plate with the flat of his fork. And then, a little more firmly, *I don't want that*.

He stabs a bean with more force than necessary.

Screw that.

If never taking any risks gets you *that* - if keeping your head down and staying precisely within the well-defined “rules” of society only makes you bored and catty and unsatisfied - then fuck it.

Fuck it.

Fuck all of it.

He wants no part of it.

He wants -

He knows what he wants.

Notes for the Chapter:

As always, please do let me know what you think!
Favorite parts or predictions or things you noticed or just whatever. Thank you as always for reading my slow-moving stories lol

7. Castle Byers

Notes for the Chapter:

So the plan was to release this on Saturday (duh).
But I'm impatient. SO HERE YA GO MERRY
CHRISTMAS.

The calendar hanging in the Byers' kitchen is scribbled here and there with Joyce's looping scrawl. Appointments, extra shifts, birthdays, reminders. The first half of the month has been crossed out, day by day.

Today is Saturday. April 17th, 1988.

It's 9:18am.

The coffee machine groans and gurgles, and the rich aroma begins to fill the kitchen. The pot sits squarely in a patch of morning sunlight from the window, lighting it up, turning it a warm, dark amber-brown.

Like Mike's eyes in the light.

Will slept horribly, but he was determined to sleep. He was determined to be rested. Fresh and alert. He really tried. He went to bed just after 10:00pm - he wasn't doing anything but worrying, anyway - and faded in and out, rolling fitfully from one half-nightmare to another. All in all, he figures as he pours himself a mug, he probably got about six hours here and there. Not bad, all things considered.

Get enough sleep: check. Kind of.

Now for step two.

He has a whole plan. It was all he could do, yesterday, after leaving the bookstore. He couldn't focus, he couldn't sit still, and he couldn't shut off his frantic thoughts. So he planned. He needs to give himself the best chance he possibly can. And that means some preparation.

Currently, he's still in pajamas: Star Wars pajama pants (thank you, Mom) and an old tee shirt. Typical Saturday morning garb. The kitchen window is cracked to let in the cool morning air, and warbling birdsong comes through with it. A couple finches and one very fat robin flit in the branches of the tree out back. Jonathan stumbles in looking like the aforementioned birds built their nest in his hair and helps himself to coffee. It feels like any other Saturday morning. It's surreal.

Today is the day. It's Saturday - *the* Saturday. The day that could change his life. Maybe for the better. But probably for worse. Almost definitely for worse. He could lose his best friend. He could ruin everything between them - make it weird, awkward, *different*.

On the other hand, he... He barely dares think it. He might... he could... they could... well. Though not probable, it's not technically impossible. And it makes Will's stomach flutter.

Shouldn't everything be a little off-kilter? Shouldn't it feel bigger, more solemn, more important?

The hug felt like that, Will reflects, pulling a long sip of coffee into his mouth. It's dark and rich and bitter, and he rolls it over his tongue. Three years ago, when he started using caffeine to supplement inadequate sleep, he heaped sugar and cream into his coffee. By now he takes it black.

The hug felt like that. Big, solemn, important.

He meant it as a maybe-goodbye. One last taste of physical connection and affection before everything comes crumbling down. Depending on how badly today goes, that may have been his last chance, and he knew it. It might have been the last time he ever got to hug Mike. Or even touch him. And standing in the honey-gold glow of the bookshop windows, with a thin, cold rain running down the back of his neck, Will held Mike as tightly as he could. He breathed in the amber-and-clove smell of Mike's Old Spice bar soap on his skin - the fresh, vaguely herbal undertones of the Wheeler's dryer sheets in his clothes - the sweet-spicy-woody hint of cologne that his dad bought him for Christmas. And under all that, one scent that has never really changed. So faint it was barely detectable, but

so familiar that Will couldn't miss it. The smell that's just *Mike* , something like sun-warmed skin and new denim and an undefinable soft musk. Will breathed in, breathed deep, and tried to lock it in his mind. In case that moment turned out to be the last happy memory he had with his best friend.

And then he left. And he didn't look back. Or else he would have done something stupid, he was sure of it.

God. It's 9:21.

Will kind of wants the morning to go on forever, permanently delaying 2:00. And he kind of wants to skip straight to 1:59pm and just get it over with. But it's way too early to start any preparations now. He has over four hours, and plus, his mother and brother are still home.

Will eyes Jonathan over his mug, suddenly hoping that his brother hasn't decided to change plans and stay home for the day. He's been counting on having the house to himself to get ready, both for peace and quiet and to avoid any questions. It's the weekend, but Jonathan has still been planning on driving to campus to meet some friends and get some homework done. He's been commuting about an hour each way to a college in the City, instead of dishing out money they don't have for housing somewhere farther away. He works his ass off to pay for gas.

Will grimaces into the last few sips of his coffee. Now that he thinks about it, he does feel a little guilty for not spending more time with Jonathan this week. He's been too wrapped up in his own thoughts to even ask how classes are going, or if he's talked to Nancy recently. He knows Jonathan misses her. New York is a long way away. But she was offered a substantial scholarship, and the school fit her perfectly, so what else was there to do?

So, Will puts down his mug and spends twenty minutes or so annoying his big brother. It's a convenient distraction from everything else. Their mother makes an appearance in the kitchen halfway through, smiles distractedly at their playful bickering, and recruits them to search for her keys. Will finds them in a corner of the counter. By the time Jonathan ambles out the door with a piece

of toast between his teeth, the morning doesn't feel quite so surreal anymore. And he's successfully shortened the time between now and 2:00pm.

Joyce is mere moments from flying out the door for her ten-to-six shift, but she stops in the kitchen doorway.

"Will?"

He looks up from his own toast. "Yeah?"

She has that look again. That pinch of worry around her eyes. That small smile that endeavors to disguise the tension in her brow. But Will knows he's the direct cause of at least some of the frown lines and the gray hairs just starting to silver her temples, so he can't really be annoyed with her.

"Everything okay?" She moves forward to squeeze his shoulder. "Any plans for today?"

So she saw right through his untroubled facade. Of course she did.

His routine answer - *Yeah, fine. No, not really.* - forms in the back of his throat, but then he swallows. His mother adjusts her purse strap, gazing down at him with a slightly tilted head, hair gathered in a half-wild bun at the nape of her neck. He owes her his life, several times over. She was the spearhead of both efforts to save him. And he knows her hovering is for a good reason, no matter how it gets on his nerves.

He can trust her with the truth - if only a half-truth.

"Yeah," he says after a pause. "It's just - kind of a big day, is all."

"Oh yeah?" She squeezes a little harder before letting go with a nose-scrunching grin. "What have you got planned? Anything fun?"

Will takes a breath, thinking, before he meets her eyes again. "Today is - well, I've kind of been planning something. Important. It might go well, but I don't... I mean, there's a good chance it... won't. It's nothing dangerous," he rushes to reassure her as her brows draw together.

“Hm.”

She shifts her weight onto the other foot, looking him over. There’s a glimmer of understanding in her eyes, and not for the first time, Will wonders if she knows about him. Or at least guesses.

“All very secretive,” she teases. Probing. But only lightly.

“Top secret,” he agrees, only half-joking. Then, with a glance at the clock, “You’ll be late.”

She nods, but makes no move for the door. “You’ll have to tell me how it goes,” she says.

Yup, there it is. That cautious undertone to her voice, like she’s testing the waters. Walking on eggshells. *That’s* the tone that led Will to suspect that she knew something.

“Go,” he evades with a laugh. “You’ll be late. You know how Donald gets when the weather’s cold like this.”

It’s not even that cold today, but she doesn’t argue. She goes. And Will is left with half a slice of toast and four hours to himself.

He lasts nearly two hours, wandering capriciously between sketching, watching TV, reading his new book, pacing the back porch, tidying up for no reason, and downing another cup of coffee. Then he can’t take it anymore. He needs to act.

He starts by turning on the radio. It’s always the radio, isn’t it? It’s been his constant companion through all this. It fills the empty house with comforting background noise as he works.

The water blasting from the showerhead starts off near-boiling, settles to warm only after Will’s skin is red from the heat, and slowly descends the thermometer until he’s prickling with goose bumps. He uses nearly everything twice over, including a squat container of his mother’s sugar scrub that advertises “wonderfully smooth skin!” He regrets it almost immediately and spends the next few minutes trying to wash it off with a bar of ivory soap and a wrinkled nose. *Never trying that again*, he thinks, and tries to laugh at himself through a

belly of twisting, crawling nerves.

He does, however - and not for the first time - sneak some conditioner, even though it seems to take five whole minutes to rinse out in the increasingly chilly water.

The bar rattles as he yanks a towel from it. The cold water put his teeth on edge, and he wraps himself tightly in the old yellow-ish fabric.

Okay. Shower: check. In fact, that should probably count for a double check for how long he spent in there. It's 12:19, according to his watch. It lists to one side, draped across the edge of the sink, and he swears he can hear it ticking even over the chatter of the radio that sits on the floor. They're in the middle of an advertisement segment right now. The same Coca Cola ad is playing for the third time since he got in the shower, and he mouths along with it sarcastically.

Will's hair, plastered to his skull with water, drips into his eyes. He shakes it back with a long exhale.

He's done something stupid. He's allowed himself to hope.

Nothing can ease the tension that runs up and down his body - not the long shower, not deep breaths, not the radio - but there's something else humming away inside him, too. That small, bright candle flame of hope, burning steady right between his lungs. He knows perfectly well that he's just setting himself up for disappointment - he *knows* - but he can't stop himself. He can't stop thinking about what he might gain, as well as what he might lose. Can't stop imagining it.

It's beyond improbable, but... technically not impossible. There's a small possibility - *small*, but existent - that he might... that by the end of the day...

By the end of the day, he might have a boyfriend. By the end of the *afternoon* he might have a boyfriend. And not just any boyfriend - Mike. Who he's been daydreaming about for years. Who he cried for in the Upside Down. Who never once left his side when the Shadow attacked. Mike, who's stubborn and patient and a bit of a control

freak at times. Who's headstrong and messy and expressive, yet ever-so-gentle with the people he cares about. Mike, who has never shied away from giving anyone a chance - who still sees the inherent goodness in the world despite everything - who wears his heart on his sleeve and lives loudly, laughs loudly, loves *fiercely*. Just for a moment, Will allows himself to sit in the antsy, happy little thrill of hope that has lodged itself somewhere in his chest. He allows himself to imagine it.

Warmer now that he's out of the shower, Will dries off and uses perhaps more lotion than necessary to soothe his red-ish skin - *the scrub stuff was definitely a mistake*, he thinks again. He flosses. Brushes his teeth. Twice. Debates for a few seconds before running the brush under water and running it over his lips in small circles - a tip he happened to glimpse in a magazine that apparently makes your lips softer. He feels silly. But he needs every bit of help he can get.

He can't really tell if his lips feel any softer, but they do end up feeling dry, so he follows it up with chapstick. It's a light, vaguely sweet mint flavor; the cheap kind they sell at the counter of Melvald's, right next to candy bars and gum.

The next sixty minutes seem to bend and warp time. Every individual minute ticks by with excruciating slowness, marked by the steady beat of his watch, and yet the hour itself slips by in barely a blink. There's so much to do, so much Will doesn't know if he'll be ready on time, and yet so little to do that he doesn't know what to do with himself. 2:00pm is years away, and so close he wants to sit down and scream.

He combs his hair while it's still damp, styling it carefully, being extra cautious with the hint of gel. He needs it to turn out just right today. Of course, it doesn't, but it's close enough and he's leery of messing with it too much. He clips his nails, partly because they're getting ragged and partly just to pass time. He picks out clothes deliberately. Nothing dramatically different from normal, but just a little nicer. A tad more put-together. The one shirt that fits him extra well, but in such a way that makes him look a little taller, maybe, a little more sophisticated. The jeans that are fairly new, not too short at the ankles yet, that sit comfortably on his hips. The bottle-green bomber jacket that his mom always says brings out the green in his

hazel eyes. The worn, brown hiking boots that lace up the the ankle. And his watch, of course, which his dad sent him for Christmas a couple years ago.

He dabs on some of the cologne that he bought a while ago and uses once in a blue moon. It's something like juniper; earthy, fresh, and masculine. He drinks a glass of water. Sticks a piece of Juicy Fruit into his mouth, too high-strung to really taste it.

Get dressed: check.

He paces back and forth between the bathroom, his bedroom, and the kitchen, looking for anything else he can possibly do. He finishes re-assembling the contents of his desk, arranging everything neatly.

And then it's 1:32.

Will walks pointlessly in circles, eyes all but glued to his watch. He closes the kitchen window and puts away his plate from breakfast.

1:38.

The radio fades out of a bouncy rock song and the announcer introduces the next song over the opening chords: *Glory of Love* by Peter Cetera. Will gives a half-snort through his nose. He always found this song excessively cheesy. El loves it, though, which means the whole party has basically memorized it. Now, Will can't decide if the universe is mocking him or making some misguided attempt at encouragement.

He finds himself standing in the middle of the hallway, staring at the portable cassette-player-plus-radio that still sits on the bathroom floor. His gaze passes right through it and off into space.

"You keep me standing tall, you help me through it all," Peter Cetera croons, *"I'm always strong when you're beside me; I have always needed you; I could never make it alone."*

He can't listen to this anymore.

Will's right hand flicks up, reaching for the dial instinctively across a yard of empty space, and the song falls silent with a slight electric

click . He blinks. The small, red light on the corner of the radio has gone out.

Must have run out of batteries, he thinks, arm dropping to his side again. Something itches in the periphery of his mind, like the nagging feeling that you're forgetting something, but he can't reach it.

He checks his watch.

1:41.

And then, as he watches, 1:42.

Stepping over the silent radio, Will takes one last look at himself in the mirror, straightens his shirt and needlessly brushes back his hair, pulls in a long breath and turns for the door.

Castle Byers isn't far, and the day is fairly nice. The rain of last night has blown away with a fitful wind, but bright afternoon sunlight keeps the chill of the breeze at bay. Most of the dampness has dried up, except for patches of deep shadow where the forest floor is still spongy with absorbed rainwater.

It's a path he's walked probably a thousand times - probably two thousand - but his pulse *thrums* through him harder with every step. Across the property line. Past the sparse red cedar that used to look vaguely like a bird, before a wind storm knocked down one of the "wing" branches last summer. Over the tiny, wannabe-stream. Usually it's shallow and slow-moving, but after all the rain lately it's swollen to a formidable eight inches of depth. The graying plank of wood bows slightly under Will's weight as he crosses the makeshift bridge. A few more minutes and he's passing through the clearing. A circle of stones marks a fire pit, dug long ago. Will steps on a rusted and half-hidden tent stake. The proof of camping trips past.

He and Mike shared a sleeping bag here once. Just once. The Party was out camping early last summer, and Will's sleeping bag fell in the stream on the way. It was still soaked and muddy by the time they went to bed, and Mike's sleeping bag was the largest out of all of theirs, so it was only logical. He didn't think he'd be able to sleep even an hour, with Mike's back just barely pressing against his own,

and his warmth filling the sleeping bag, and his scent all over the soft fabric. But Will woke up in the morning feeling better rested than he had in weeks, despite being out in the forest in the dark, where so many memories reared their heads. He was amazed to think back through the night and not remember a single nightmare.

He was also cuddled right up against Mike, face tucked into the back of his neck and legs tangled together, having apparently rolled over and reached for him in his sleep.

Mortified, Will shot out of the sleeping bag like he'd been burned, fervently thankful that he had woken up before anyone else did. Especially Mike.

Now, something in the back of his mind wonders. Wonders if they could do that again. On purpose, this time. Wonders if, instead of rolling away and sneaking out of the tent, Will could wind his arms around Mike and press closer. He wonders.

He doesn't want to - he doesn't want to hope, doesn't want to get himself all worked up only to be let down - but he wonders.

Will blinks out of the memory and finds himself striding the last few yards to Castle Byers.

His left arm twists automatically and he stares at the face of his watch.

It's 1:51 and Will is in position.

He waits.

This is stupid, he keeps thinking. *This is so stupid. You know how this is going to end. And look at you, getting all dressed up -*

He winces as his father's voice materializes in his head and sneers, *preening*.

One hand lifts to brush at his hair, but then he drops it again.

This is stupid. At best he won't even show up. At worst he'll come yell at you. He'll probably tell you to never speak to him again. Why did you

even do this? Why did you even come? You're so goddamn stupid, Will.

The gum has gone bland and tasteless in his mouth, and he chews robotically. The minutes crawl by.

It's 1:57 and he's really considering just leaving. Leaving and getting on a bus and never showing his face in Hawkins again.

He walks to Castle Byers, lifts the old sheet over the doorway, and then changes his mind. If he's inside he won't be able to see Mike approaching. And somehow, the idea of being in that small space - seemingly so much smaller now than it was when he was twelve - makes a twinge of panic rise in his blood. He goes back to pacing.

It's 2:00 on the dot and Mike is nowhere to be seen, and Will has transcended nervousness into a kind of heavy, hopeless, tingling-numb acceptance of his fate. He touches a metal support pole of the fort to discharge the static in his clothes. Maybe he's gone truly numb, because the strong shock doesn't even hurt.

The Peter Cetera song is stuck in his head and it keeps looping over the only lyrics he remembers. And now he knows for sure that the universe is mocking him.

It's 2:03 and Mike still isn't there.

He's not coming, Will thinks. Relief, disappointment, and an unnamable ache bubble in his chest. But it's only 2:03, he reminds himself. Give it time.

But then 2:04 passes, and 2:05, and 2:06.

Mike still isn't there.

He's not coming, Will thinks, and this time he doesn't argue with himself. *He's not coming. Of course he's not.*

He wants to cry.

It's really idiotic, but the only thing he can think is, *Why the hell did I take a shower and everything? Stupid. All that for nothing. Worse than nothing. I'm so stupid.*

His watch ticks inexorably onwards to 2:07, and Will's nose is pricking with heat. His throat aches, and he swallows. His lips press tightly together.

It's okay, he tells himself, and clenches his jaw. He swallows again and looks up at the shifting canopy of new-spring leaves. *It's okay. This was the best outcome anyway. You don't lose him this way.*

But he can't stop going in circles, berating himself silently as he grinds a toe into last fall's dry leaves. He was so stupid. So *stupid*, and why did he have to say *everything* in that letter, that *goddamn* letter, why -

A crunch of a twig.

Will *whirls* and there he is.

Mike. Right there. Three arm-lengths away.

Will's breath shudders into his lungs in two uneven beats. The gum in his mouth flies to the back of his throat and he has to swallow quickly to avoid choking on it - which has the unexpected advantage of closing his gaping mouth for him.

Mike is standing in the middle of the forest with his hands stuffed in his pockets, shoulders drawn up to his ears. He straightens a little as their eyes meet, mouth opening but not saying anything, drawing in a quick half-breath in answer to Will's own. And he looks so vulnerable, in that moment, so *open*, that Will takes an instinctual half-step towards him before he catches himself.

He's here, Will thinks blankly. And for a few seconds, that's all he can think.

Mike's eyes have always shown everything in his mind. Now when Will looks into them, he sees something that sends a soft shiver up and down his spine. The look in Mike's dark eyes is so raw, so vulnerable and open and... hopeful. .. that for just a second, Will hopes too.

And in that brief, breathless, golden moment of hope, Mike is *gorgeous*. Dark, halfway-curly hair ruffled by the April breeze, face

dappled with the soft forest sunlight, long lashes casting shadows on the curve of his cheeks, shirt collar folded neatly over the neck of his navy sweater. A tiny *pop* of static jumps between two of Will's fingers.

The moment ends just as suddenly as it began. It must have lasted two seconds, but so much just ran through Will's head that he feels almost dizzy.

Mike lifts a hand out of his pocket in an awkward half-wave, and Will blurts, "You're late."

His arm twitches as he flicks his own watch. "Yeah. S-sorry."

All Will wants to do is fly across the two yards of space between them and kiss Mike then and there. He holds himself back. The likelihood of rejection is still high. It's entirely probable that Mike showed up just to say, *"Look, you're my best friend but I can't be with you like that, let's not talk about this again and try to forget the whole thing."* Or even to yell and scream at Will, slap him in the face for being such a creep and a horrible friend - like he probably deserves. So he stops himself, standing a respectful distance away.

He's already preparing himself for the gentle letdown, rehearsing his response in his head - *Yeah, for sure. No, it's totally fine, it's not a big deal. You know, it had been a long day when I wrote that, I think I was just really tired. Sorry I made you uncomfortable. Let's just forget it, yeah? For real, don't even worry about it, it was nothing.*

Neither of them quite know what to say, it seems. For a moment there's just the call of songbirds and the wind in the trees.

Then Mike's mouth quirks up in a dry smile. "So what's up with you?"

It's an olive branch, and Will clings to it like a lifeline in a stormy ocean. He shrugs and a bit of the tension leaves his shoulders.

"Oh, you know, hunting marmots."

Mike nods with a sniff. "Mm. Yes. It is Saturday, isn't it?"

“Marmot hunting day,” Will agrees. “You?”

“Sustained silent contemplation,” Mike replies, twitching lips betraying his serious eyes.

Will huffs out a silent laugh at the reference to their third grade teacher, who made the class sit in five minutes of silence at the end of each school day to “reflect on their learning and calm their minds.” In reality she probably just wanted them all to shut up for five minutes. Will and Mike found the name hilarious, for reasons unknown, and nearly suffocated trying not to laugh the first time she said it. They never did quite get over how funny they found it, even so many years later.

“Again?” Will pokes. He keeps smiling, though his heart is climbing to his throat. “Haven’t you have enough of that this week?”

The seriousness in Mike’s eyes spreads to the rest of his expression and Will curses himself. He just had to bring it up, didn’t he? But then again, isn’t that what they’re here for?

It hits him, all at once. Like at the lunch table, but so much worse now that they’re *here*. Now that it’s *today* - it’s happening. Mike knows. Mike knows everything, and now he’s here facing Will in the meeting place. He read the letter. And now...

Will squares his shoulders and tries his best to keep his face neutral.

Now, this is it.

A weird feeling of finality is shimmering in Will’s temples, in the pit of his stomach, the back of his throat. Or maybe significance. Like this moment - the very air around them, the sunlight, the smell of the woods - has a tangible weight to it. Because this is it. This is the end of the line; this is where it stops. For better or for worse. The secrets, the lies, the half-truths, all of it. He can’t hide anymore. Not completely; not from everyone.

They’ve been avoiding it all week, pretending the letter doesn’t exist, hanging on to that last tenuous thread of normality, but now that’s gone too.

And here they are. In the meeting place. Their very presence an acknowledgement of the letter, of what Will said, of what he is. Everything is out in the open now, and whatever happens, Mike knows. And Will will never be able to fully go back to living the way he was, even if he never tells another soul, even if Mike asks to please just pretend none of this ever happened. Mike can't un-know. It's out. *Will* is out. And from this moment on, everything will be different.

And there's a strange, almost alien feeling of relief in that. He's out. He's *out*. Someone sees him - sees him as he really is. It's a bit of a head rush, making him just this side of lightheaded and weirdly giddy - for a moment he feels almost powerful, almost... proud.

He can't tell if he's excited or scared.

He opens his mouth to say something, anything, when Mike reaches back into his pocket and pulls out a folded, lined piece of paper. Will's stomach executes a long string of gymnastic feats as Mike paces forward a few steps and hands it over with a mumble of, "Here."

The motion is jerky, puppeteered, and Will's mind goes off in a monotone chant of, *fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck*. Because this is not what he was prepared for. Writing isn't usually Mike's style. Not for confrontations. Mike talks. That's what he does; it's something he's very good at. If he had to write something down to express it - if he couldn't even bring himself to say it aloud -

Fuck, fuck, fuck, this is bad, I'm fucked, I'm so fucked -

But he's determined to be strong. He won't cry. He won't blubber. No matter what this paper says, no matter what Mike does - not if Mike punches him in the face and not if Mike pushes him up against a tree and kisses him right there. He'll be strong.

Will glances up at him, immediately shies away from the eye contact, and takes the paper. It opens with a crisp rustle, revealing a list titled, *Things I like about you*.

Notes for the Chapter:

Heeeyy as usual thank you for reading! And if you have a moment I always LOVE hearing what you guys think, favorite parts, predictions, just whatever thoughts you may want to share. :)

8. The Walk

Notes for the Chapter:

Yeah I know I just updated like two days ago, hopefully y'all aren't sick of this story by now. But here's this, enjoy!

Will reads in a kind of blank disbelief. Maybe he should be feeling something, *anything*, but he can't bring himself to believe that what he's seeing is actually real.

Things I like about you:

You're inquisitive and curious and smart

You're shorter than me. I know you hate that, but I've always found it kind of cute. Sorry.

You gesture with your hands a lot when you get excited

You seem so innocent, but then once in a blue moon you say something that shocks just about everyone and it's amazing and usually hilarious

You doodle everywhere, on everything, all the time

You're always right there by my side no matter what, even when I don't really deserve it.

This can't be real.

Will is sure he'd be lobster-red and about a hundred and ten degrees to the touch if he could only feel anything except for this numb confusion. His brain keeps getting stuck, like a worn record, hitching and looping and spinning around and around the same thoughts, unable to move forward.

For a moment, he has the ridiculous urge to look up and check his surroundings. He's disoriented; completely lost.

He wasn't prepared for this.

This is nothing like what he expected.

He never -

This can't be -

You sing to yourself sometimes if you're deep in thought or off in your own world, usually drawing

You're handsome

There it is.

His emotions pop back into existence all at once and he can physically feel the hot blood push up his neck and into his face.

This -

Mike -

How -

Mike is -

He -

(Note: I think you may be actively trying to kill me because I might be having a heart attack writing this right now. This is your fault. I blame you for this.)

Will's dazed mind manages to mutter, *yeah, well, that makes two of us.* He realizes that he's making some kind of face and immediately does everything in his power to suppress it to neutral. Normally, it's something he's very good at. Today he can tell that he largely fails.

I can talk to you. Ever since we were kids, that's been something I've liked. We can tell each other things.

You're always collecting little things like polaroids and bottle caps and movie tickets

You're always really kind and accepting of people no matter what

You're brave. (You are. Stop saying you're not.)

I never know exactly what's going on in your head. It's interesting. I can just tell there are a lot of deep thoughts happening up there. I hope that doesn't sound creepy.

You're always looking at the stars. You love outer space. I think if you could you'd live up there.

You love music so much

You're my sunshine.

The last line is eraser-smudged and written over several times, but Will can make out the faint imprint of the same letters underneath. As if Mike wrote it, erased it, wrote it, erased it, wrote it.

Will finds Mike's vague form in his peripheral vision, and it takes him a moment to will himself to look up. Mike has retreated a step to half-lean against a tree, where he stares at the ground between them. In a way, Will is glad. He doesn't know how he would have read that if Mike had been watching the whole time. His fingers slip along the sides of the lined paper, smoothing it. Three different impulses hit him at once, and the result is a kind of full-body stutter. He wants to pocket the list; tuck it away safely and carry it like a talisman from

this day on. He wants to hold onto it, and hold it tight - this still feels too impossible, too miraculous to be real, and he's afraid if he loosens his grip even a modicum that it'll melt away into mist. And, more than anything, he wants to read it over again, and again, and it's just starting to hit him, for real, this is *real*, somehow, impossibly, and his mouth is pulling up into a proto-grin with no consent from his conscious mind -

He glances over the last line - that last fucking line -

You're my sunshine.

Goddamnit, Mike.

Oh, my god, he thinks, you're such a dork. You're such a cheesy dork. You idiot, I love you.

There's a swell of affection rising in his chest, somewhere just above his diaphragm, warm as bathwater and weightless as dandelion seeds. It's meshing with all the other things that are popping around inside him like ping-pong balls, fizzing into a potent concoction. The hesitant fringes of happiness. Lingering disbelief. A half-numb, removed kind of feeling that fades bit-by-bit as his brain finally starts to accept what his eyes are telling him.

"You like me?" Will blurts. His voice comes out a little flat, but it was the first thing that came to mind and he's honestly just glad he said anything in English.

He sneaks another half-second look at the list, compulsively checking that it's still there. It is. The cool breeze rustles it in his hands and turns his fingers pink with chill.

Mike's arms lift limply, like an apologetic-shrug-turned-helpless-gesture. His mouth opens and closes before he can meet Will's eyes. "Uh... yeah? Yeah." He shrugs again and tilts his reddening face down. "Yeah." His chest visibly falls under the navy sweater, as if releasing a long-held breath.

He seems so far away. There's a yard and a half of space between them. Will wishes he was closer; it feels like they're shouting to each other across a football field. But he can't move his feet. He can only stare, frozen. Eventually he opens his mouth again.

"You're shitting me."

Mike's head pops up and he meets Will's eyes, holding his gaze for more than a few seconds this time. "No -! Really, I..." He gestures at Will, and then at himself, struggling uncharacteristically to get something past his lips.

Will's mind is still spinning, spinning. Backtracking. Re-analyzing. Trying to twist and turn this whole situation like a rubix cube; trying to find the *real* meaning, the one that *fits* , the one that's *true* , because this can't -

He can't -

Mike likes girls. He's sure of it. So how -

This doesn't feel like real life. It feels surreal - like when you get up and re-join reality after being dug into a good book like a tick for upwards of five hours.

"I thought -" Will stops. This feels rude, somehow. But Mike looks at him and waits, his throat moving in a swallow. "I thought you... liked girls."

A few expressions play across Mike's face. He twists it into a clearly forced, wry smile, and his hands float up once again to toss about helplessly. He always has done that. Gestured a lot when he's high-strung. And Will can see right through it. He's trying to be flippant to cover up his discomfort.

"I like both, okay?" Mike almost snaps. Then his tone lowers a bit, along with his eyes. "I'm a freak of nature, I know."

He grins, stiffly, like he's trying to make it a joke. It folds in on itself almost immediately under Will's startled gaze.

Both, Will thinks. *Oh*.

And just like that, the rubix cube *thunks* into place, and the drifting sensation of disbelief dries up in a second. And Will is, all at once, fully present. Here. In the wind-chilled, sun-warmed forest, with his carefully-styled hair beginning to come loose and flutter in his eyes. His boots solid on the forest floor. His eyes locked on his best friend. And little bits of his life starting to line up in a semblance of sense.

Mike waits with a corner of his lower lip snagged between his teeth, looking up at Will through his eyelashes, as if holding his breath. As if waiting for approval - or forgiveness. His shoulders are square and tense, head ducked.

Will's heart gives an abrupt ache of sympathy. Because he recognizes the feeling written all over Mike's posture. He knows that feeling.

"Both?" Will says.

"Um. Yeah...? I know it's weird -"

Will cuts him off with a sharp shake of the head. "No. I - I think it's cool. Like a... a superpower or something. Like - I mean - well most people can only like one. Or the - you know, the other." Will's hands move in a quick circle to illustrate his point.

"Right," Mike deadpans. "That is usually how it works, yeah."

"I'm just - I think it's cool."

Will doesn't actually know what he thinks. He hasn't gotten a chance to think about it yet. But damned if he's going to let Mike feel like a freak for it. Not Mike. Not sweet, brave, bright, *wonderful* Mike. Not for this. Not ever.

Both. God, Will is an idiot.

Mike scoffs and shakes his head, but looks up hopefully when he says, "Yeah?"

"Absolutely. David Bowie likes both, I think."

"Really?"

Will nods. A smile starts to shine through.

Mike's own smile flashes through for a moment and Will's heart floats away happily towards the sporadic cloud cover.

"Well, he's *David Bowie*, though," Mike says with a laugh - a real one, this time, nervous but genuine and unconstrained. "I'm just..." His arms flap once more, this time indicating the entirety of himself.

And that laugh, that gesture, is so characteristic of Mike, that the tension relaxes. The half-uncomfortable strain between them goes lax and disappears, and Will ventures forward a few feet. The yawning space between them closes, and then it's just like it's always been, and Will is so relieved he could cry. He won't - he promised himself that he won't - but he could.

Mike takes a few steps, too, and without quite meaning to they start walking, side-by-side. Will finally folds the list and slips it in the pocket of his bomber jacket, making sure to button the flap.

It's a few minutes before they talk again. They wander aimlessly between the trees and deeper into the woods in silence, but this time it's a comfortable silence. Companionable. Will can't stop smiling at his boots as they crunch softly over springy layers of pine needles, leaves, and soil. He breathes, feeling like he can fill his lungs to capacity for the first time in a week. The forest smells like green spring growth and damp bark and old fallen leaves. And when the breeze picks up at the right angle, Mike's scent washes over Will too. Some birds, distinctly heard but unseen, hop around in the branches above. It's so peaceful that Will could almost forget about the question burning a hole in his head.

Actually, no, he can't forget about it for a second.

Mike showed up.

He wasn't mad; didn't yell, didn't storm off.

He didn't softly, gently let Will down.

The list feels as heavy as a lump of lead in his pocket.

And Mike said he liked him. He said he liked Will. For real.

Will is only just catching up with this.

He likes me, he thinks, quietly. That stupid, uncontrollable grin grows. Will could float; he could fly. *He likes me*.

Which leaves the question.

“So,” Will starts, and Mike’s head turns in his direction. Will flounders, not actually sure what he wants to say. “I didn’t expect... I mean, I never thought you’d show up.”

Mike gives a kind of small, dry laugh. “Neither did I.”

Their pace is measured, and Will has no trouble stretching his strides slightly to match them with Mike’s. It’s a habit nearly as old as him.

“I mean,” Mike continues, seeing Will’s quizzical glance. “No one... well, El knew, but no one else...” He takes a long breath, and Will nods slowly, another piece *thunk* ing into place.

“Is that why -?”

“We broke up? Yeah.”

Now that makes sense. Will always knew there was something more to it.

He frowns. “Wait. Did she break up with you because you’re -?” He cuts off, blanking on the actual term, but Mike is shaking his head.

“No - no. I broke up with her. Well, we kind of broke up with each other. That was just kind of what started the conversation.”

“Oh.”

Good. He thought he’d have to get angry for a second there.

A memory surfaces, and Will snorts. “Wait, is that why she’s been acting weird lately? Does she know?”

“Oh, my god. You noticed?”

“No duh.”

Mike laughs and scrubs a hand over his face. It's not quite as beet-red anymore, only flushed at the cheeks. “God. Yeah, I uh... may have told her. Sorry. She wouldn't leave me alone, and I needed help.”

Will's hackles rise, but only slightly. Honestly, if anyone has to know, El would be Will's first choice. That doesn't stop him from being a little irked that Mike told someone, though.

“Way to keep a secret,” he ribs, jabbing Mike with an elbow. Then he moves on; this isn't the time. “Help?”

“Like I said. I really didn't know if I should come or not.”

Will's heart picks up pace for maybe the thousandth time today. “But you did.”

Mike nods at the trees in front of them.

Will swallows. It takes a couple tries to make himself say the word. “Why?”

“I thought that would be obvious.” Sometime over the last minute or so, they've drifted closer. Their elbows brush just slightly as Will steps around part of a log. His heart is thudding in his throat, now, and he watches Mike sideways as he goes on. “Right? You said - in the letter - that if...”

If you're open to trying it, please meet me in Castle Byers this Saturday at 2:00pm.

Yes. Will remembers. How could he forget those words? They've haunted him for the past five days.

Mike slows and stops, and Will makes a slow circle to face him. They're less than two feet apart, now, but he feels far away again. Will doesn't know why he wants to be having this conversation at 2

inches apart.

Like in O'Reilly's, Will thinks, and shivers.

Maybe he's just chilly from the wind, and Mike's sweater looks very inviting in the soft forest sunlight.

The worst part is over, but Will can feel his muscles tensing again. Here it is. The reason they're really here; the culmination of all this. Mike's sweater is in the sunlight, the navy lighting up a dark, creamy blue, but his face is in dappled shadow. His eyes are dark. Dark, and nervous, and open.

And Will *wants*.

"If you d-" Will starts, but Mike cuts him off.

"I want to try," Mike says. Softly. So impossibly softly. And then, more firmly, "I want to try."

That potent concoction of affection and disbelief and happiness - bubbling, hesitant joy - is popping and fizzing and shining in his chest, like sparklers woven in the spokes of his ribs. His eyes have gone wide, and he can't help the timid-eager little half-step that he takes towards Mike.

"Really?"

Mike nods. His lips are just slightly parted. Will's hands shake.

"You really want -" He cuts off, partly in shock at the whole conversation and partly because he wants to do this right. His trembling hands start to gesture, but they're standing too close and they end up just bumping into Mike. "Do you want to be...?"

Mike's own hands appear out of nowhere on Will's sides, settling ever-so-gently over the thick fabric of his jacket, and Will is pretty sure he feels his soul leave his body.

"Of course I do." Mike is half-laughing, but completely earnest, earnest as ever. "Dummy."

Will squares his jaw, determined. "Let me say it."

Mike's eyebrows lift and he twists his head away sarcastically. Will smiles. And then he breathes in, and out, and says it.

"Do you want to be my boyfriend?"

Mike's head tilts down and for a moment Will freezes, anticipating the impossible, but Mike only rests their foreheads together.

"Of course I do," he repeats, and the sparklers going off in Will's chest burst into fireworks. Mike's hands tighten just slightly on his waist. "Dummy."

"Dork," Will mumbles back, and closes his eyes.

Boyfriends, he thinks. It clicks into the back of his brain like a perfectly-cut puzzle piece.

He only opens them again when a hot drop of moisture hits the top of his cheek.

"Ugh," he giggles against Mike's face, "Really? Always with the drama."

Mike shoves at him and swipes a sweater sleeve over his face with a watery laugh. "Shut up! Asshole. And here I thought we were having a moment."

But he's not really mad. He beams down at Will, one hand sponging a sleeve against his eyes and the other still resting lightly on Will's side.

And then it's all too much, and it's coming up Will's throat and into his nose and the backs of his eyes, and he sniffs with an irritated grunt. "Dammit, Wheeler, look what you did. I promised myself I wouldn't do this. I was doing really well, too."

"Sorry," Mike chuckles.

Maybe it's the breathless, unsteady elation that's roaring away like a campfire in his chest. Maybe it's the gentle warmth of the sun on the crown of his head and at his back, lifting the chill away. Maybe it's

the woodsy-spicy amber-and-clove smell of Mike, heady and so familiar. Maybe it's just that he's so happy that it's making him stupid.

But just for that moment, Will has the courage to straighten and say, "So are we gonna kiss already or are we gonna stand here being emotional all day?"

The rush of bravery drains from his veins the moment Mike's eyes flick downwards. To Will's lips.

Holy shit. I just said that. I actually just said that. I'm dead. Is this happening? This can't be happening. I'm in a coma or something. I fucked it all up.

But Mike isn't laughing it off, or backing away, or shaking his head. He's just inching closer. Leaning in. Will's skin lights up in tingling shivers, and he can't move. Doesn't want to.

"That sounds reasonable," Mike half-whispers.

In the moment before Will remembers that he's supposed to close his eyes, his vision is narrowed to a smattering of caramel-colored freckles over red cheeks, dark bangs turned messy by the breeze, and full lips. Then he remembers, and his eyes squeeze shut, and all he can see is the flicker of sunlight through leaves behind his eyelids.

Will is frozen. It's a lucky break, then, that Mike isn't.

A warm, soft pressure touches Will's mouth and his breath catches hard in his throat. He holds back for a heartbeat, his whole body shaking, and then he presses in, hungry and disbelieving and then achingly tender and then hungry again. He's clumsy and unsure, but he's wanted this for so long, and he has to consciously pull himself back.

Don't be too much, he reminds himself firmly. *Don't drive him away.*

It's not perfect. It's a little awkward and a little fumbling, and Will has no idea what the fuck to do with his arms, and is he supposed to breathe through his nose or just hold his breath? Who knows? Not Will. But it's better than perfect. It's real.

They lean back and Will fights a wave of shyness. What are you supposed to do *after* a kiss? Movies never show that part. The kiss is the end; cut. Scene over.

“Um,” he mumbles, and jumps slightly when Mike’s palm touches his jaw.

“Shut up,” Mike says, gently. “I don’t want to think right now. I’m tired of it.”

Relief seeps through Will’s limbs. He hadn’t even realized it, but not thinking is exactly what he needs right now.

“Yeah,” he agrees. And he lets go. Their lips fit together again, more easily this time.

It’s weird. It’s so... familiar. Obviously the actual sensations are new, but the feelings they stir up are so undeniably familiar, and so unique to *Mike*, that Will has a bizarre flash of *deja vu*. The feeling that they’ve done this before, even though they definitely haven’t. Like it’s part of some cosmic dance, the steps rehearsed, muscle memory already ingrained; like they’re puzzle pieces that click together effortlessly, every rough edge fitting together like they’ve always been there.

Kissing Mike is the first breath after a bad nightmare. Waking up and realizing that it’s okay.

It’s the stomach-swooping moment right at the end of a long hill, when the bike’s momentum is at its peak and the wheels are whirring beneath him and the wind is streaming past his face, through his hair, and for a moment it’s like he could keep flying down that hill forever.

It’s laughing so hard and so long, late at night at a sleepover, that his sides feel like they’ll split and tears run down his cheeks, gasping for breath, face scrunched up in uncontrollable happiness.

It’s the first chord of his favorite song on the radio - the *instant* recognition, the comforting familiarity, the feeling of all at once being home - like something in the deepest part of his chest is saying,

oh, it's you.

It's completing a big drawing project, sitting back and looking at how far he's come, knowing that he's done something that he loves, knowing he's made something new, the *rightness* of it, like his very soul knows that this is what he's supposed to be doing.

And as Will figures out what to do with his arms, and they ease into a simple rhythm, the sparklers in Will's chest move through the rest of him. They lean apart several times, breathing deep, giving the other the chance to step away or say something. But neither does. Will is perfectly happy here - he could die happy, in fact. And Mike doesn't seem to be in much of a hurry either. So they lean together, supporting each other's weight, and kiss.

Like making up for lost time, Will thinks, as Mike's slightly chapped lips part just a hair.

Will's hands get restless and move from Mike's back to his shoulders. One gets bold and rises to cup the dark, almost-curly head of hair. It's thicker than Will expected, not as fine or silky under his fingers as he imagined but soft and wind-tousled, with that light, freshly-washed feel.

The world doesn't really matter, right at the moment, and Will's mind fills and blurs with the immediate, half-burning heat of flushed-skin-on-flushed-skin. Big, calloused palms holding him steady. A mouth that's hot and soft and insistent, gently plying Will's lips apart, lulling him into a warm, bubbly haze with the movement of Mike's jaw, dabbing at his lower lip with just the hint of a soft-slick tongue until Will sighs and ventures forward with his own to meet it. The touch of tongue-against-tongue sends an unsteady wave of warmth through his body that seems to unravel everything inside him, starting at his chest, through his stomach and up his spine. It turns him limp and tense all at once, trembling slightly with a fizzy, tangy energy under the gentle explorations of Mike's tongue.

Maybe they're moving too quickly. But the thought is barely a shadow in Will's mind before he discards it. He doesn't care. Not right now. And Mike doesn't seem to mind, either. Right now, time is stopped, and Will wouldn't break that for anything.

Mike has much more experience kissing than Will does, and Will accepts it, melts into it, lets Mike guide him, show him how, lets him pull their hips and torsos together, lets him twirl his tongue around Will's, lets him break Will wide open and expose all the secrets he's ever kept. Lets him draw back just far enough to gaze into Will's eyes, right through him, right through his mind and into all the furtive, awful, wistful, impossible, desperate things Will has ever wanted. Will lets Mike *see* him, like no one has ever *really* seen him before. And Mike, with his innate ability to take the lead, parts his lips and lowers his head and seems to swallow down Will's secrets like honey. Sucking them from Will's lips, drawing them from his skin, leaving him so light he's almost dizzy, feeling as though he'll float right off the muddle of leaves and pine needles below his feet. But Mike is there to hold him down, hold him steady.

Another heady rush of that odd fear-pride goes through him, and Will pushes up slightly on tiptoes to get closer. Closer to his *boyfriend*, he reminds himself, and it makes him grin, breaking the kiss for a moment. Mike takes advantage of the pause to re-adjust their position with another quick glance into Will's eyes, searching for signs of discomfort. Of course, he finds none, and this time Will is the one that moves in first. He needs to show - he needs to tell him - he needs to *know* -

This is me, Will says with the eager tilt of his head, the grasp of his hand at the back of Mike's neck. *This is all of me. This is what I am. This is who I am. This is who I've been all along, you just didn't see it.*

I see you, Mike says with the brush of a thumb over Will's cheekbone, the delicate nip at his lower lip. *I see you now.*

And, god, Will loves him.

Mike is the rich-spicy scent of Old Spice bar soap - amber and clove - and the smell of the woods caught up in his hair. He's the indignant voice of justice, always righteously angry at the unfair nature of the world, always chasing that ideal, always choosing to believe that maybe tomorrow everyone will get what they deserve: happy endings for the "good guys," justice for the "bad guys." He's the defiant words spat in a bully's face just before a punch to the mouth; he's the unrelenting, cheerful insistence that, "*Of course* we can beat that top

score! Just a few more tries, come on.” He’s the deep-rich beauty of autumn leaves, bold and bright in the face of the inevitable winter. He’s the memory of kind, earnest, dark eyes and an unapologetically loud laugh, bolstering Will through nights in a slimy shadow of Castle Byers. He’s Mike. He’s home. He’s *hope*.

For the first time in what might be years, Will truly, fully lets his walls down. This can’t possibly be real -

But it is.

It is.

Notes for the Chapter:

Have no fear! This is NOT the last chapter.

That being said: thank you for reading! PLEASE do let me know what you think! This being a Climactic Chapter, I would love to hear any thoughts you have :)

9. A Diner and a Shitty Movie

Will is exhausted.

He slumps over the shiny metal table with his chin wedged in the crease of one palm. He ordered a coffee, but it has yet to arrive, and he joked a few minutes ago that his energy reserves are running low. Usually when Mike sees him like this, it's post-flashback. Mike's chest hums with guilt that he tries his best to keep off his face. He hates thinking that he was probably partly - if not entirely - to blame for the high levels of anxiety that drained Will so much.

But Will's eyes aren't dull and downcast like they are after an episode; he's not dead-silent, and his fingers don't shake where they trace gentle patterns across Mike's knee under the table. He's not tense as a wire on the cracked red vinyl. In fact, if it wasn't for his elbow propped up on the table, Will would be melting bonelessly sideways into Mike. Which Mike would have no complaints about - none at all. It's just, they're in public. Sitting on the same side of the booth is already enough to make Mike a little self-conscious. But so far, no one seems to care.

Gloria's Burgers and Shakes Diner is an establishment on the fringes of Hawkins' tiny "shopping district." It's all checkered floors and red booths, metal tables and pastel neon lights. The amputated fender of a classic Ford Thunderbird protrudes from one wall. The waitresses' uniforms consist of aprons over pink shirts and black skirts. It's one of those retro places designed to look like you just stepped back in time to the 50s. Either that, or they just haven't remodeled since it was actually built, which is equally likely. Actually, that may be the more likely scenario. But whether intentional or not, the old-fashioned aesthetic draws in a fairly steady stream of passers-by from the nearby highway, as well as teenagers who sigh over the jukebox and cherry-topped milkshakes despite never having been alive in the 50s in the first place.

At 3:12pm on a Saturday, they just missed the lunch rush, and the diner is pretty quiet.

Usually, Mike would be basking in the ambiance - coming here

always makes him feel a little like Marty McFly on his way to fix the timeline - but not today. Today his attention is fixed on the person sharing the corner booth with him.

Will lifts his head momentarily to twist his hand, glancing at his own watch. The back of his wrist is striped with red marks where it's been bent harshly under the weight of his head. It's 3:13, now. Mike can't really believe it. It's been an hour - just over an hour - since he walked the final few yards to Castle Byers and saw Will standing in a patch of shade, boots scraping patterns into the moist ground. Has it really been a whole hour already? Has it *only* been an hour?

The pink-and-black figure of the waitress wavers in Mike's peripheral vision and Will perks up at the scent of cheap, strong coffee.

"Here you go, hon," the waitress chirps in that forced, *I'm tired but I have to be cheerful or my manager will yell at me* way. "Your food should be right out."

Will thanks her, his smile large and genuine, and Mike buries his own smile in his glass of pepsi. The fizz tickles his nose and seems to fill his lungs when he breathes in. He looks different than usual. Will. Mike can't put his finger on it, but he swears there's something different about him. And it's not just the extra care in the styling of his hair, or the shirt that fits him like a glove under his bomber jacket, or the jeans that - well. That Mike has taken note of before.

Not that Mike has ever checked out Will's ass. And if he has, it was a complete accident. But whatever the case, these particular dark-wash jeans have not escaped his notice.

And it's not the blood-blush splotched along the tips of Will's cheekbones, either, or the way he's sitting close enough for their legs and hips and shoulders to just barely brush. It's something else. There's something almost imperceptibly different in the way he's carrying himself. Are his shoulders less curled-forward than usual? Are his movements looser, more relaxed? Is his smile bigger or his voice smoother? Hard to tell.

Maybe it's just that Mike doesn't think he's looked away from Will since they first locked eyes next to Castle Byers.

It was almost surreal, in that first moment. Will turned so fast that Mike swore he heard his neck pop, and then it was like they both froze. He didn't know what to do, couldn't move, couldn't do anything except stare with his heart jumping in the pit of his throat. Will's hazel eyes reflected the bottle green of his bomber jacket in the watery light of the forest. His side-parted hair, the chestnut shades burnished amber in a stripe of sun, was starting to come loose in the wind. It brushed his temple and forehead, but he made no move to brush it away. His expression was something that Mike couldn't even begin to name - a raw mix of something startled, something incredulous, something dull and hopeless. And then, in less than a heartbeat, it changed. Light pushed through from underneath. A spark of something almost-happy, almost-hopeful, but cautious. Guarded.

Their food arrives. They've been chatting quietly - comfortably - about upcoming movies and school and whether decaf coffee should be expunged from the face of the earth. But conversation ceases as Will rips into his grilled ham and cheese. Half of it is gone within thirty seconds. The herbed-and-salted steak fries start disappearing at an alarming rate soon after.

Will admitted, after a loud stomach rumble made him pull blushing away from a kiss, that he had forgotten all about lunch. His stomach had been all tied up with anxiety, and the last time he'd even thought about food had been somewhere around 9:30 in the morning. So when 2:45pm rolled around, and the knots in his stomach finally loosened, he realized all at once how ravenously hungry he was. And Mike hadn't exactly eaten much at lunch either. So, here they are, a short walk and a car ride later.

Mike glances past Will as he battles to suck his concrete-thick milkshake up the straw. His slant nosed, ugly-taupe car reflects the sun just outside. He had parked it at the side of the dirt road, cutting through the forest to get to Castle Byers. He would have taken his bike, but... Well, truth be told, he didn't want to arrive sweaty and disheveled.

And this time, when they crawled into the car, Mike barely hesitated before he leaned over the gear shift and fit his mouth to Will's. Like he'd wanted to for days, and probably much longer than that.

Now, he's slightly miffed that they're in public. That they can't lean against one another as they eat. Or steal a kiss between bites. Or talk about everything that's filling Mike's skull to the brim.

But he knew what he was signing up for. He was prepared for the caution, the secrecy.

What he wasn't prepared for was just how addicting this is. How intensely he did not want to let Will go once he had him in his arms. And, perhaps most intoxicating of all, how much Will wants *him*.

Mike's skin prickles with heat as he works his way around the edges of his cheeseburger. It's hard to process, even nearly an hour later, just how much that moment affected him. When he rode on a surge of adrenaline to dip his head down, and Will's breath audibly *caught* just as their lips brushed. How it sent a tart-sweet panging through Mike's stomach; a fizzy elixir of disbelief, nerves, relief, and giddy elation. How clearly Will *wanted* this, how much it meant to him. How Will froze up for barely a heartbeat before *pushing* up into the kiss, hungry and demanding and pleading all at once.

El never did that, Mike thinks, and feels guilty immediately. It feels wrong comparing them, somehow, but he can't help it. It's impossible not to place them side-by-side in his head.

El was ever-curious, sweet but unafraid. She was all soft, spongy curls against Mike's cheek, and eyes the deep creamy brown of hot chocolate on a snowy night, and delicately plump rosebud lips, and small, strong hands that more often than not tangled themselves in the fabric of Mike's sleeves or jacket. Her kisses were like the funnel cakes at the theme park in the City. Light, sweet, addictive, always leaving you half-fulfilled, wanting more.

But kissing Will - kissing Will is like crawling into your own bed after a long trip away from home, finding instant satisfaction and comfort, finding exactly what you've been needing without ever having to ask. Will's kisses simultaneously leave Mike wanting more and fill him to the brim, leaving an unfamiliar feeling of contentment that lingers even now.

Kissing Will is the luxury and the necessity that Mike has never been

able to touch before; it's the thing he's longed for for so long but never even allowed himself to consider it. It's complete disbelief, giddiness, and a strong, stable contentment that grounds him and keeps his wild emotions in check - a bone-deep calm that's single-handedly keeping him from launching into at least four different freak-outs at once.

Will is all smooth, warm lips with a whisper of sweet-minty chapstick, and little puffs of breath against Mike's cheek, and a slim, solid torso pressed against his own. Not soft and curved like El, but somehow Will's shape seemed to lock right into Mike's like a puzzle piece.

There was a hint of something fruity on Will's tongue when it slid timidly past Mike's lips, like the gum Will has always preferred since they were kids. He gave a whole-body shiver when Mike chased that sweetness, sliding his tongue over Will's.

Will is done already. A few fries linger on his plate like the detritus of a storm. He scrapes up ketchup smears with one, fingertips shining with grease.

"Ready?" Mike says.

Will glances down at the half of a cheeseburger still sitting on Mike's plate. "Are you?"

But Mike is already pulling his wallet out of his back pocket, craning his neck for the waitress. He has plenty of things on his mind more important than a cheeseburger right now.

The old, faded quilts do absolutely nothing to cushion the warped planks in the pallet. There's no real way to sit comfortably. Mike shifts around on the ridges of wood for probably the tenth time, but to no avail. Plus, it's a little more difficult to find a comfortable position when you're in the middle of making out with someone.

They didn't quite want to go home. Not yet. Somehow, Mike felt as if

unlocking the front door of a house would jolt the world back into reality, and this would all shatter. Like if they stepped into the all-too-familiar, mundane, everyday entryway of the Byers or Wheeler house, the whole day would melt away and he'd realize that he'd made up the whole thing in a daydream. It's stupid, he knows. But Will didn't seem in a huge hurry to go home either, so here they are again. Back at Castle Byers - inside, this time.

For the past five - ten? Twenty? - minutes, Mike has been observing. Exploring. Processing. Because now that he's gotten over the initial shock, there's a lot to process. And Will doesn't exactly seem to mind Mike's slow, eager explorations.

He takes his time. He puzzles over - almost marvels at - the experience of holding, *kissing* something undeniably *male*. How different it is - and yet not at all off-putting. The slim solidness of Will's torso. The scent of that cheap ivory soap on his skin that carries a hint of something like fennel, masculine yet light. The texture of Will's straight, short hair under Mike's fingertips. The smooth, low timbre of his sighs and barely-audible exclamations against Mike's mouth. Every time Will makes a little noise in his throat, something in Mike tightens like a rubber band. He scoots impatiently closer, over the quilt-covered pallet, and fits a palm to Will's hipbone. Will tilts closer on his own, without having to be pulled. The chilly air in the fort seems all at once thick and warm.

Mike's parents - and the whole rest of the world, it seems - are in his head. Hissing snidely. Snapping at him to stop, spitting slurs and insults in the back of his mind. But he doesn't. Maybe he'll care later - he'll almost definitely care later - but right now all he cares about is Will's hand pressed firmly to the back of his head, the taste of ham and cheese still lingering in Will's mouth, and the fact that of all the people on earth, Will chose him. Plain, boring, slightly obnoxious Mike Wheeler who sulks with his paperbacks whenever possible and wouldn't touch a sport with a ten foot pole. Uncoordinated and unattractive. Uninteresting. And yet, Will Byers chose him.

It's almost a power rush. He wants to shove a middle finger in the world's face and go on kissing his best friend - no, boyfriend. He's almost afraid to believe it's real. It's like he's living out his most heavily guarded and secretive fantasies, and it gives him a little thrill

of goosebumps. Admitting those fantasies, even to himself, was never an option. They were thoughts to be squashed down, ignored, covered up with other things. Pointless. Impossible. A stupid dream. Now he's melting back against a rough-bark trunk of the fort wall while Will cautiously, desperately nuzzles into him, pushing his tongue against Mike's in turn, learning quickly. Pouring himself into the kiss with impatient eagerness.

The funny thing is, it's not like Mike imagined. El was sweet, but she could also be fire, sometimes, raging and beautiful and a little dangerous. Maybe it was stupid of him to compare them - to expect Will to be anything like her. Because this is *nothing* like kissing El. And Mike is still kind of getting used to it.

This isn't fire, it's light, it's warmth; sunshine spilling through him, warm and sweet and golden as honey, spreading to the very tips of his fingers, soothing his frayed nerve endings, calming his racing mind.

It's comfort. It's surety and safety after a week of intense inner turbulence. Everything inside Mike has been going haywire from the moment he woke up this morning, every tendon strung tight, every digit tingling with a restless energy, his mind as loud as a briefly teacher-less classroom. Chaotic. Nearly unbearable. But as soon as Will kissed him, all of that faded away, and he felt like he could breathe again for the first time in a long time.

The relief is immense. He's been so desperately, anxiously caught up in a torrent of questions and worries and *what-ifs* that he felt like everything inside his head might just push its way out at the expense of his skull. Now, all of that is assauged at once. And there, in the slowly-but-surely-falling-apart structure of Castle Byers, Mike leaves behind all his second thoughts at once. They'll be back. They always come back. But right in this moment, the stars align, and for a glorious few heartbeats all is well in the world. It's a comforting feeling of *knowing*, deep in the molecular level of himself, that this is okay, he's okay, this is good, this is wonderful, this is *right*. They're okay. He's okay. It's just Will, and he trusts Will. He can let go.

So he does. He lets Will gradually push him back against the trunk, lets him grip Mike's shoulders hard enough to hurt, lets him take over

all his senses starting with touch.

The worries and nagging thoughts and hesitations return quickly - *what are you doing, what are you thinking, god, what are you doing ?* - but he quietly suppresses them as he leans back.

Mike is saved from having to come up with intelligible conversation by the wind, which whips the entryway sheet into a frenzy and scatters his bangs across his forehead. He swipes them back with crooked fingers as Will leans over to peek at the approaching clouds.

"Think we should go back to the house?" he proposes glumly.

"Busy," Mike says, and starts to lean in again, but Will sits back with a laugh and twists his arms into a stretch.

"I need to stretch my legs, anyway. They're falling asleep."

Which is... fair enough. Castle Byers feels much smaller now than it did when they were kids, and they're a bit pressed for space. Knees and elbows knocking into support beams, heads ducked to avoid smacking them on the hand-patched roof. But Mike huffs out a sigh. He doesn't want to leave this bubble outside reality. He doesn't want to face the real-life consequences of what he's done today. He doesn't want to *think*. He's done so much of it that his head aches, and it only shuts up when Will fits his lips to Mike's. But Will is unfolding himself with a groan, and Mike dutifully follows suit.

They walk. And this time, when Mike lets his left hand fall loosely at his side, Will bumps their pinkies together in offering. Mike's palm turns out on reflex - El used the same cue - and Will slowly but firmly interlaces their fingers. When Mike looks over he has absolutely no choice but to mirror Will's close-mouthed grin.

"Ugh," he complains, "this is too sappy. I need to punch a brick wall or something."

"Oh, my god, please do not do that again. I thought your hand was broken."

"My hand was broken."

"It was not. It was bruised." He squeezes the offending hand with every word for emphasis. " *Severely, severely* bruised."

"Yeah, like - the *bones* were bruised or some - that fucking hurt, okay?"

Will rolls his eyes with a shake of his head and Mike squeezes back.

"What, no sympathy?"

"No. Because you were a dumbass."

"Well fine, I'll just go hold someone else's hand."

Mike feigns getting away and Will quirks an eyebrow.

"Get back here. Didn't you know? There is no escape. That's how this works."

"Oh, is that how it works?"

"Yeah, it's like a blood pact. You didn't read the fine print?"

"Who has time for that?"

But that brings something else to Mike's mind. Something that's been tucked away in his copy of *The Two Towers*, retrieved frequently, re-read so many times that the creases have already grown soft.

Will's handwriting flashes through Mike's mind. The sketch of a dragon on the front page margin. The sloppy haste that set into the letters midway through, as if he couldn't spill the words fast enough. As if his pen was tripping over itself in his hurry to tell Mike everything.

It hits him, for the first time, how much bravery it must have taken to put all those words on paper.

"Matt Dillon," Mike blurts.

"What?"

The wind batters at Will's jacket, flapping it against his sides, and he

struggles to align the zipper with one hand.

“Matt Dillon,” Mike repeats. Somehow, it’s harder the second time. He walks in silence for a few moments, stroking his tongue against the backs of his teeth, and then adds, “And... Randy Palmer.”

“From Chemistry?” Will says, his tone immediately alight with teasing.

“No, from Russia. Yes, from Chemistry.”

“So *that’s* why you always partner with him for labs. You have ulterior motives.” Will is having a field day. His eyes are animated, steps light and bouncing as he jabs Mike in the side with an accusing finger.

“I do not *always* partner with him. Shut up.” Mike thinks it over. He kind of does, actually. But, look, the guy is a good lab partner. Smart, easygoing, generally cheerful. Possessed of a head of fire-engine-red hair that glints bronze in the light.

Will just gives a skeptical chortle, his poking fingers slipping right past Mike’s defensive arm.

Fine. Two can play at that game.

He mirrors Will’s pursed lips back at him. “River Phoenix.”

Will scowls and draws back for a moment - almost like an automatic defense - but then Mike watches his walls drop again along with his shoulders. He shrugs, a little pink in the face.

Mike recognizes the boundary, and gives it a light push. “Didn’t know you were into blondes.”

Will’s flush becomes more pronounced, but he doesn’t tense again. “Little bit. I guess.”

“How’d I happen then?”

Will goes silent. The wind is getting worse, pushing in some storm clouds from the northwest. Mike can smell rain on the air. The gusts

are growing heavy and chilled with humidity.

"I don't know," Will says at last, carefully, and Mike looks at him. "I guess - it just - I don't know. Happened. Long time ago."

Mike fights the urge to say, "*Uh... why?*" Because if he's nothing much now, he has no fucking idea how anyone put up with him as a kid, let alone *liked* him. Instead, as the house comes into sight through the branches, he scrubs a hand over the back of his neck and manages to spit out, "Yeah, uh. Yeah. Same here."

In his peripheral vision, Will's head twists abruptly around. "You're shitting me," he says for the second time that day. "You - how long?"

Mike thinks back, shoulders lifting and dropping with a wave of embarrassment. Will adjusts their fingers where they're linked and Mike realizes he's been unthinkingly rubbing his thumb along the back of Will's hand. This only heightens the embarrassment, and he has to take a moment to fight the urge to pull away and retreat back into his safe, familiar shell. He pushes through it.

"I don't know," he echoes. "It took me a while to realize."

By unspoken agreement, they retreat back into more neutral topics. How Chester will be growling at the thunder when they get back. What they should do tonight. The annoying Coke ad on the radio that's been played every two minutes for weeks now. For a while, they avoid any discussion of all... *this*. This is all so new, all so big, that it's like neither of them can linger on the subject for long without having to swerve aside into familiar territory. But they don't let go of each other's hand, even when their palms start getting sweaty. And once they kick off their shoes and confirm that Joyce is still at work, Will kisses Mike in the entryway.

It rained fitfully through dinner. Chester stretched out underneath the table, getting in the way of everyone's feet, pawing at them every once in a while for handouts.

Will could feel his mother's curious gaze on him the whole time.

He knew he was smiling, and he knew he was permanently red, and he couldn't make it stop. And Joyce Byers is no fool by any stretch of the imagination. Her eyes traced from Will's red, smiling cheeks to Mike's restless hands, curiosity brimming in her gaze over the top of her mug. But when they reported hanging out in Castle Byers and getting lunch at Gloria's, she didn't press for details. She just nodded in acknowledgement and started in on the story of a grumpy customer.

Now, the half-hearted rain spattering against the window panes has given way to a continuous downpour, drumming on the roof and *plink-plonking* in the gutters. Will and Mike have moved from the warm cheer of the dining room to the living room, which is lit only by the TV screen and the hall light. Joyce took Chester with her into her room, along with her mug of tea and the book she's been working on. Jonathan called mid-dinner to say he was staying with some friends for the night. They're alone.

It's a risk, being here in the living room, sitting the way they are. But Will knows his house. He knows he'll react instantaneously to the sound of his mother's bedroom door beginning to open, and he knows they'd have plenty enough time to shoot apart before she would round the corner. And plus, they are genuinely enjoying the movie. Kind of. Well, Mike is enjoying it. He always gets a kick out of those terrible, made-for-TV movies, and Will doesn't mind laughing along. This one is about werewolves. The effects are horrendous and the script is hilariously off-key. So Will doesn't feel like he's missing much of anything when he finally charges his courage meter up enough to turn and look Mike in the face.

The wind tosses a curtain of rain against the side of the house, and Mike's eyes in the semi-darkness are richly dark, bottomless, and gleaming with piqued attention. They dart down to Will's lips, once, twice, and then they're kissing again and Will can't believe it, he can't *fucking* believe it and it all kind of swoops through his brain like a head rush. Everything, all of it - the list he carefully transferred from jacket to jeans pocket - Mike's scent, somehow just a tad different up close - the chocolate-cherry milkshake that Mike shared with Will at the diner - and what he said afterwards -

I don't know. It took me a while to realize.

A while. A *while* ? Mike has liked him for “a while”? What does that mean? And when exactly did Will end up twisted so much on the couch, pressed into Mike’s chest?

He breaks the kiss abruptly to ease back. He’s annoyed at himself.

Don’t overwhelm him, a sharp voice hisses in the back of his mind. *Don’t be too much. Or you’ll push him away.*

Mike hums an interrogative. The front of his sweater is all messed up from Will’s grasping fingers and his eyes are a bit unfocused. The effect is so adorable that Will is kind of pissed off. But that fades immediately when he thinks, *This is my boyfriend. I have a boyfriend.* And he has to fight off the dumb grin again.

“Just,” Will says, remembering a beat too late to respond. “Is this...?”

“Okay,” Mike confirms in a half-whisper. He twists around on the couch to gaze at the corner of the hallway. “Your mom...?”

“We’d hear her coming. Her door squeaks.”

The werewolf gives a roar onscreen, baring obviously-plastic claws and teeth, and Mike barely spares it a glance. Thunder rumbles, soft and far-away. And Will can’t help but beam. He’s always loved the particular coziness of watching a scary movie while it rains. Well, this one isn’t what you’d call *scary*, but it’s trying. And with Mike snuggled up against him on the couch, this is pretty damn near perfect.

Especially when Mike moves in this time, turning Will sideways on the couch cushion with one hand at his side.

He used to daydream about this kind of stuff. When they’d watch a movie or play video games together, late at night during sleepovers, Will would drift off into an imaginary parallel universe where he and Mike were pressed up together in the blue-ish glow of the screen. Holding hands, maybe. And maybe, impossibly, Mike would turn to face him, those freckles nearly invisible in the dim light, and press their lips together. Hushed and breathless and secret in the strange magic of late-night-early-morning. And now it’s not a daydream

anymore. Now they really are cuddled up on the couch. Lips sliding together, slick with a dab of saliva.

But just a minute later, Will finds himself withdrawing again, cursing himself. He got too intense again. Pressed in too close, gripped too hard, bared too much of his soul. He can't help it; he keeps losing his concentration. By the time he realizes how intense he's being, it's already too late and he has to physically hold himself back.

And Mike has noticed.

Damnit.

"What's wrong?" he murmurs into the air between them. Will can feel the whisper of Mike's words over his lips.

"Nothing."

"We don't have to -"

"No, I - I want to, just -"

Will freezes up, unsure how to put his thoughts into words. Mike waits. Ever-patient.

"I don't want to..." Will shoulders wriggle indecisively as he pushes past his mouth's reluctance to form words. "I don't know. Overwhelm you. I guess."

"Try me," Mike says at once.

Will hesitates. Mike nudges him. His grin lifts one half of his mouth higher than the other.

"I can always shove you off the couch if I want."

That makes Will snort. "What, just dump me on the floor? Gee, thanks."

"Right." Then Mike gets serious again. "Really. Try me. I want to see."

Will's upper teeth worry over the skin of his lower lip. He's not sure... but it's tempting. So tempting. Especially now that he's had a taste.

His lip slides out of the grip of teeth and his head gives one firm bob of agreeance.

Will leans in slowly to give Mike a chance to change his mind. And then, for the first time, he lets himself go. He slowly, cautiously slides his hands up into Mike's hair the way he's always wanted, licking his lips, waiting for a signal of disapproval. He winds his fingers into the wild waves - pulls, gently - and tilts Mike's head until their slightly-parted lips bump. Licks his way past the yielding seam of Mike's mouth, tasting the stale sweetness of the milk he drank with dinner. And that's when he feels his control slip a few notches.

The air presses out of his lungs in a rush with one strong, instinctual tightening of muscles. A hard exhale against Mike's mouth, like a reverse gasp. Will caves in even closer, getting lost bit by bit, and outside the rain sweeps over the roof and taps at the windows.

He should stop. He should pull away again. Mike will be disgusted, he won't want to do this again, he'll change his mind or -

But Mike is giving him green light after green light; meekly opening his mouth to Will's fervent, unpracticed kisses; adjusting his arms so that Will can crush closer; taking Will's hip with one firm hand and drawing him in, sighing in appreciation. Will clicks their teeth together for a jarring moment, but Mike doesn't withdraw an inch. And with every one of those little signals Will slips a little further, half-drunk on the disbelief and elation - he has the undeniable urge to press closer, to give more, take more, feel more, like he's trying to make up for all those lonely nights and hushed thoughts, and he knows he should slow down but he doesn't want to. He needs Mike's warmth sealed tight against him, Mike's legs interlocked with his - when did that happen? - Mike's tongue tracing the shape of his mouth, Mike's addictive little groans and half-swallowed breaths shuddering through his bones. He needs to know that Mike means it, that this is really happening, that he'll stay, that they're doing this.

All at once he finds himself pushing Mike down and back, against the couch cushions. Nuzzling into a string of soft, slow kisses, a ticklish

warmth spreading up his sides where Mike's hands have fit themselves to his lower back. Mike's tongue swirls around the tip of Will's, hot and soft, teasing. Will swallows a small noise. His skin feels hypersensitive, and it must be a hundred degrees in here and his teeth close down instinctually on the fleshy part of Mike's lower lip. Mike moans, softly but clear as a bell in Will's ears, and the sound sends an electric current from the base of his spine through his fingertips, hot and alive as exposed filaments and he feels strangely powerful -

The hallway light and TV flicker and flare in tandem. Will jolts out of his fog of passion, lapsing all at once into a heart-hammering, rumpled silence. Oh, god. He's hovering over Mike on the couch, pinning him down by the shoulders. He snatches his hands away and sits straight up just as Mike says, "Whoa."

"I'm sorry," Will blurts, "God, I'm - I'm sorry, I just - I've never been able to - I got carried away, I guess, I didn't mean to - I'm so sorry."

"No - no, no - *Will*," Mike says, trying and eventually succeeding in cutting off Will's babbling. He's still lying on his back - which makes sense, considering that Will is now perched with a knee braced on either side of his thighs - and it makes Will's heart beat even harder behind his ribs. "It's okay. It's okay. What are you sorry -?"

A deeply familiar click-and-creak sends Will into lightning-fast motion. In less than two seconds they're both sitting, stiffly, upright. A foot and a half apart.

"You guys okay?" Joyce brushes around the corner, her bathrobe untied over pajamas. "I think the storm just knocked the power out for a second."

She notices their tense postures.

"Everything all right?"

"Yeah," Will answers, at the same time that Mike says, "We're good."

Maybe it's just Will's imagination, but he swears he sees Mike's mouth - red and a little swollen from kissing - quirk up in a smile.

Yeah, he thinks, we're good.

Joyce fusses over them for just a minute or so, offers to put some popcorn in the microwave, and then clearly forces herself to give them some space.

“Ah shit,” Mike says suddenly, and Will tilts his head in question. “I forgot to call my mom.”

Notes for the Chapter:

As always, I LOVE hearing your thoughts - favorite parts, predictions, thoughts, what-have-you. Thank you for reading! Sorry for the long wait for this chapter, I got mired in end-of-semester BS.

10. Spark

Will's foot bumps Mike's under the table. He bumps it back as he talks to Lucas. They've gone through several conversational acrobatics already, starting on the topic of Lucky Charms commercials, skimming briefly over the inherent bullshit of being assigned more than one Ayn Rand novel in one year, and boomeranging back and forth between upcoming movies and the last campaign. Now, they've ended up on the subject of their parents' horrible fashion sense.

Will's sneaker toe slides from Mike's ankle up the hem of his jeans and back down. Mike tries to catch it between his own shoes, but Will's leg darts back like a fish, replaced by a teasing poke from the opposite foot.

A silent battle begins under the table. Over it, most of the party has joined in to groan about their parents' jeans and BBQ-dinner dance moves. El starts reenacting Hop's dancing and Max cackles, her headband slipping a notch. Chocolate brown eyes catch Mike's across the table, mid-laugh, and he swears he can see El's brow arch. Delicately. Just for a moment. She doesn't need to glance down, towards where Will is definitely not winning their quiet war. Her message is clear enough already. Especially when the brown eyes crinkle in a teasing smile, meant only for Mike. Then, just as quickly, she's back to laughing with the Party.

Will has launched into a story about his mom teaching him to dance for the Snow Ball back in junior high. He demonstrates with outstretched arms, swaying in place on the hard bench. The Party laughs appreciatively and he grins through his words.

There it is again. That barely-perceptible... *change*. It shows itself more often when they're alone together, but - *there* - it flickered in Will's posture again just a moment ago. In his gestures, his inflections. Like the snap of a candle flame flaring from somewhere within. Barely perceptible - but there. Real. Mike only caught it because he's been watching for it.

Since that day at Castle Byers, Will has seemed just a tad different

than usual. Different, but not unfamiliar. He seems more relaxed. More vibrant. Bolder, brighter, like he was when they were little - before everything happened. Before the horror and the trauma sent him retreating into his shell.

It's a little overwhelming, to be perfectly honest. In a good way. Mike knew that Will changed after the Demogorgon. No way any of them could have missed *that*. Will has been a quiet kid since kindergarten, and probably long before. Teachers and parents used to describe him as *sensitive*. Never one to approach a stranger and initiate conversation. Not much of a talker in class. More inclined to sit and draw or read than to tumble around the neighborhood causing trouble with the other kids. He was shy and sweet and thoughtful; adored by adults, targeted by bullies. But he was never *withdrawn* until the Upside Down.

And Mike never realized just how much he missed - how much Will was holding back, hiding - until he opened up again. Until he started talking. And, god, have they talked. It's like they can't stop. In the car, on the couch in the basement, through notes passed in class and deep into the early hours of the morning on their radios. It's almost cathartic. They've always been the kind of friends that can talk about anything, but now? Mike is pretty sure he's talked himself hoarse.

It's not just about being queer, either, although admittedly that's a big part of their conversations of late. But Will has more to say than just that. As promised in his letter, he tells Mike about the Upside Down. And then about his dad. And about other things - things he figured he just shouldn't mention. Things Mike never knew in all their years of knowing each other, until now. Like that Will actually really loves flowers, and he's harboring vague thoughts of maybe being a tattoo artist, and he sometimes feels a little talked-over and ignored in the Party. Stuff that, he told Mike with pink-tipped cheeks and averted eyes, he can't really tell anyone except his boyfriend.

He tunes into reality again and realizes that Will has been distracted with telling his story. Mike sees the opportunity and strikes. His shoes clamp down on one of Will's. Will's other foot, in turn, seizes one of Mike's. They are at an impasse.

El shoots Mike one of those *looks* again - half amused, half

exasperated. She knows exactly what's going on. Of course she knows. She's the only one that knows.

The Party doesn't know about them yet. It's only been a week and a half, after all. It's far too new, too fragile to share. Too exciting. El figured it out right away, because of course she did, but they haven't actually told anyone. Will tentatively brought it up, just once, but Mike recoiled from the thought. He's fine with Will knowing about him - well, obviously - but the rest of the Party... well. That's not - he's not - *ready*. He's just not ready for that.

Their stalemate has dissolved into a series of increasingly noticeable kicks and jabs by the time the bell rings, drawing the attention of both Dustin and Max. Especially when Mike accidentally kicks Max in the shin instead of Will. He flees the cafeteria with a pissed-off redhead at his heels, who eventually catches him in a headlock until he apologizes through his laughter. She threatens death upon him, as per the usual, and the Party disintegrates good-naturedly to their various classrooms.

A hand snakes around Mike's elbow and he finds himself stumbling sideways through the AV room door. The scent of ivory soap and thick, chalky paints reach him just before Will's lips do, and the door barely closes behind them in time.

In his surprise, Mike stupidly blurts the first thing that comes to mind. "We're gonna be late for class."

Will pauses, clearly pretending to think. Then he releases his lip from between his teeth with a cheeky shrug. "Eh."

There it is again. The daredevil in Will that he hasn't seen much of since they were twelve.

He leans into Mike, hands sliding past the flaps of his jacket, and Mike fumbles blindly for the lock on the door. Then he gives in.

In a way, he almost expected to get used to this. But he hasn't, and he's not sure he ever will. Every time is a little like the first time. Every time, like the first time, he's surprised - almost intoxicated - by how passionate Will is. Mike kissed El on the regular when they were

dating, and since then there have been a grand total of two girls he convinced to make out with him: once at a party Lucas dragged them all to and once in the prop closet between scenes. But he never got caught up in kisses quite the way he does with Will.

Will kisses him like he *wants* Mike. All clinging hands and an insistent tongue and panting breaths, like Mike is something worthy of being wanted, and it resonates through Mike's core. He never thought that Will would ever want him back, never even considered it. Tried not to think about it at all. And he's still getting used to that. Being allowed to think about it. Act on it. Being allowed to push back when Will pushes him against the poster on the wall, basking in the unsteady warmth that fizzes down his spine and pools low in his belly.

They pause when the bell rings. Then Will shifts closer, legs fitting together like the teeth of a zipper, and swipes his tongue over Mike's lower lip. Mike's backpack presses into his shin where he dropped it and he kicks it away with a huff. Will laughs at him, but it turns into a stuttering sigh when Mike's hand finds its way to his jaw.

By the time they leave the AV room, they are... what's the word? Exceptionally tardy. Mike can't really bring himself to care.

Will ducks into his classroom first, vanishing around the doorway with a wave. His bangs have strayed into his face and Mike watches him swipe them to the side just as he passes out of sight.

Mike's backpack bumps rhythmically against the small of his back as he walks, trying to do some tidying up of his own. He tugs his shirt straight under his jacket, attempts to do something about his own hair, and -

Collides with someone.

"Oof, my ba-" he starts to say automatically. He swallows the last word. For a split-second, he's relieved. It's not a teacher.

It is, however, Troy Harrington.

Mike scowls, ducks his head, and continues on past. James is waiting

a little ways down the hallway. Two more figures waver in Mike's peripheral vision. By the time he turns, he's too late. They've formed a loose circle around him. And if Mike knows anything at all about Troy, that grin isn't a friendly one. His stomach swoops through the floor. His hands tighten on the straps of his backpack, settling it more firmly on his shoulders as if that will ground him somehow.

"The hell do you -" he snaps, but he's cut off once again as Troy ambles a few feet closer. Hands stuck in his pockets, one curl brushing ever-so-haphazardly against his forehead as if he doesn't spend half his time making sure it lies just right.

He thinks he's goddamn Clark Kent, Mike thinks with a grimace as Troy begins to circle him. Playing casual.

"You know, it's weird," he says. He circles behind Mike, forcing him to turn. "I could have sworn I saw you and Byers crawl out of the broom closet just now. And uh..." He swings a wrist up as if checking the time. He's not even wearing a watch. "Whoo! Seems like you might be a little late to class."

Mike's grimace twists into sarcasm. "What does that make you?"

"A concerned citizen."

Mike rolls his eyes, but his heart is kicking at his ribs.

It's fine, he reasons, it's fine, he's done stuff like this before. It doesn't mean he knows anything. He doesn't know anything. He's just some asshole. Same old, same old.

He mutters, "Fuck off," and tries again to push past.

His shoulder goes warm and then numb with impact, and then he's scrambling up from the floor. The hit took him completely by surprise. He landed hard. He's taken a hit from Troy and his goonies before, but never within school walls where a teacher could emerge any second.

"What is your problem?"

His shoulder is already tingling back to life, but his elbow and

tailbone have some very strongly-worded complaints about the density of the linoleum.

“Oh, we’re just curious,” James pipes up. He’s at Troy’s shoulder now. His traditional place since junior high. “What you might have been up to in there. Science project?”

“Moose hunting,” Mike deadpans back.

He tries again to slip around them, but this time it’s one of Troy’s other buddies that gives him a shove. Chris, he thinks, or maybe Greg? He doesn’t much care, and they never really shook hands and introduced themselves. He manages to keep his feet this time. But his palms are cold, fingertips slick with sweat. He knows the script. It’s as familiar as this school hallway. And Troy’s pack doesn’t stay so long when they’re only interested in casting some insults or barbed comments. Or stand so close. Or exchange knowing glances with each other like there’s a predetermined plan that Mike is not privy to.

Troy steps forward, caging Mike in as the others block off escape routes. “So where’d your little boyfriend go?”

Mike is fucked.

Will is walking on air.

He can’t stop thinking about it. Whenever he tries to focus on something else, his mind is pulled right back, gently and inevitable, like a magnet.

This is... huge. It’s huge. Things like this just don’t happen. And you certainly don’t *talk* about it. You don’t share stuff like this. With anyone.

Except -

He bites down on his lip to smother a grin and bends his head over his notes.

Except with your boyfriend.

The initial shock has almost worn off, but Will still can't stop smiling. Maybe it's stupid, or silly - he feels silly thinking it - but there's a closeness between them that wasn't there before. Sudden and intense and undeniably thrilling. Now that they know each others' darkest secret, it's as if they cut straight to the core. As if every single layer between them has been stripped away at once, leaving their very hearts and souls bare and vulnerable to each other. It would be terrifying - well, it is terrifying. Every time he thinks he's calmed down, his heart starts thudding in his chest again, and his whole body is strung tight with a thrumming energy, and it's like approaching that first huge downhill on a roller coaster all over again. Except this time, there's trust there. Especially since they started talking. *Really* talking, like they haven't in a long time. Sharing their stories.

Mike struggled uncharacteristically when he tried to put his realizations into words. How it hit him in the middle of everything, how he didn't know what to think or what to do with it, so he smothered it until he couldn't anymore. The real story of his breakup with El.

Will, much to his own frustration, cried when he told his own story. How he's always kind of known, but he didn't have the words to describe why he was different until he was about twelve. How he admitted it aloud to himself in the Upside Down - which he was sure was some form of punishment. How scared he was, how much he yearned for someone he could talk to, commiserate with, someone who *understood* -

Hours and hours. Stolen moments that morph into afternoons. Private spaces wherever they can find them. Mike's car while they drive aimlessly or park somewhere out-of-the-way. The AV room, door locked. Will's bedroom. Mike's basement. Half-whispering, most often, leaning together to hear, their faces almost touching. Mike's breath warm on Will's cheek. It's been the longest and shortest ten days of Will's life.

They've started to share other secrets. Maybe just for fun, or maybe because the feeling of catharsis is addicting at this point. Will can't really tell. But why not? They already know each others' most heavily-guarded secret, why not a few more? Silly ones, serious ones,

fears and hopes, guilty pleasures and years-old confessions. He feels almost like he's meeting his best friend over again. Will never knew how much Mike wanted Nancy's approval, though he'd never say it to her face, or that he could eat through a whole jar of peanut butter with a spoon -

"Jif. Jif peanut butter. Not Skippy, Skippy is inferior. Why are you laughing."

Will huffs out a silent laugh at the memory, and raises a hand. He forgot his textbook in his locker, and Mr. Bell isn't too strict. He'll let him go grab it before the class activity starts.

He gets a nod of approval, grabs the hall pass and slips out into the echoing hallway. He's just approaching his locker when one particular echo catches his attention. Voices - not raised, but distinctly unfriendly. From around the corner.

He almost continues back to class, except that he recognizes one of the voices. Ugh. Yes, he recognizes *that* voice. It's Troy. And based on the ever-so-familiar intonations, it's safe to guess that what he's saying is something along the lines of "fag" or "fairy." So Will backs up against the wall and creeps to the corner. Maybe if he can find a trash can lid or something he can throw it, give the poor soul a chance to escape with the distraction.

He recognizes a second voice in the millisecond before his eye edges around the brick corner. And something in his gut convulses into knots.

Mike.

The hall pass clatters to the floor and Will inhales sharply, but no one turns at the sound.

Mike has one hand cupped protectively around an elbow already. Maybe they shoved him, sent him stumbling hard into the lockers. Will's been on the receiving end of that particular trick innumerable times. The knots in his stomach go soft and molten with heat. His hand slips an inch down the wall.

Not today, he thinks. He's not sure if it's a plea or an assertion. *Not now*.

He doesn't catch what Mike says, as far down the hallway as they are, but he's clearly mouthing off. Troy says something back, and Mike responds sharply. Troy's voice raises enough for Will to clearly make out his next words.

"You're dead, Wheeler!"

Mike is down. Will is walking. He didn't even register Troy moving, but he must have, because Mike is getting to his feet -

James' foot slices out. Mike makes a hollow noise and his frame goes halfway limp, arms clutching his stomach. Hot blood pulses just near the surface of Will's cheeks, his palms, his neck and ears -

Troy is yelling again, mocking, watching Mike retch and try to stand.

He feels it coming this time. Gathering in the pit of his diaphragm, crawling with life, with energy. A raw current that builds in his nerves until it *hurts*, but it's a good hurt, like aching muscles at the end of a long run.

"Hey!"

Troy snaps around mid-word. The energy peaks, snaps, and Will *shoves*.

There's a sharp *crack*, which might be Troy's head hitting the lockers, and for a moment Will freezes. But Troy is cursing and groaning too much to be dead. And twitching. The tables have turned, now; Mike has made it halfway to his feet, and Troy is on the grainy tiles. A burnt-metallic smell hangs in the air like a mist, dissipating quickly.

Two strides take Will to Mike, and he braces a hand under his elbow. Mike winces - it's the same elbow he was holding earlier - but doesn't make a sound of complaint as Will helps him up.

"Fuck," Troy hisses from the ground. His friends have gathered around him, seemingly caught between trying to help him up and going after their targets - now plural. Troy slaps away James' hands

and starts pulling himself up by a locker handle, moving stiffly.

They're standing side-by-side now, arms and legs barely touching, and Will glances up to meet Mike's eyes. He looks halfway sick, still hunched a little over his stomach, but an almost-smile brightens his features as their eyes meet. Then they face their opponents.

Troy is up. And he's furious. His objectively handsome face has turned ugly with pain and anger. His voice comes out rough. "What the hell did you -"

"What is going on out here?"

Mrs. Ramos storms out of her classroom. Which just so happens to be directly behind the lockers Troy crashed into. The impact must have made everyone inside jump.

Her elbows and high heels jut sharply as she power-walks towards them, her angry teacher voice fully activated. "Harrington, Byers, Wheeler, what is - hey! You too, James, get back here! And you! Everyone, office, now!"

She herds them all towards the front of the school like a scolding jay, fingers snapping and voice shrill. She waves a finger along with the principal's name, brandishing it like a weapon. Will couldn't care less. He doesn't care if he has detention for the next year. Troy moans and complains and gripes like he's been shot. Playing the victim. Mike looks at Will sideways, tilts his head towards Troy, and rolls his eyes. Will grins. His hands are kind of numb, but the feeling is coming back with pins and needles. He flexes his palms as they're shooed through the office doors.

The disapproving office lady has the decency - or maybe just the good sense - to seat Troy's group across the room from Will and Mike as they wait for Principal Coleman. Troy mutters with his friends. Will tries to see how badly bruised Mike's ribs and stomach are from the kick. Mike waves him off, claiming it's not bad, but he winces with every deep breath.

Anger simmers in him again. Heat that crackles into energy.

Will looks down at his fingers where they rest on his thighs, under the worn waiting table. His hands flex, tendons standing taut, paint from art class crusted under a few nails. He breathes out. His fingers twitch, and a static spark jumps between his thumbs. His hands buzz. Like he sank them into TV static. He turns his hands so his palms face each other. Focuses. A single, razor-thin, white-blue string of electricity arcs between them. Just for a moment. Then it's gone.

Will touches a table leg to discharge the static, runs his palms down his pant legs, and takes Mike's hand under the table. Mike squeezes his fingers.

He tilts his head, sizing up his partner-in-crime from the corner of his eye. Takes note of the faint freckles concentrated in a miniature milky way across the bridge of his nose. The slant of his cheeks. His hair, disheveled and a bit dusty from being knocked to the ground. The sly smile that he sends Will's way when he notices him looking. And this time, Will doesn't look away. He smiles back.

Notes for the Chapter:

So before you leave: THERE WILL BE A CONTINUATION! While this part of the story has wrapped up, I will be continuing it in a sequel. I have many more plans to explore their new relationship (which strangely you don't see much of in fics in this fandom, usually it stops after they get together), and I hope you guys will go on that journey with me :)

That being said, THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING!! I love all of you and, as always, please do let me know any thoughts you have!